

ANDREW FULLER'S RESPONSE TO THE
"MODERN QUESTION"—A REAPPRAISAL
OF *THE GOSPEL WORTHY OF ALL*
ACCEPTATION

by
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Can and should the gospel of salvation be offered to sinners without distinction? Is unregenerate man under moral obligation to repent of sin and believe in Christ upon hearing the gospel? Is there any sense in which he is *able* to do so? And is the minister of the gospel obligated to call upon the unregenerate to exercise faith and repentance? These queries collectively constitute the so-called "modern question" of Andrew Fuller's day, which we can reduce to simply—*is faith a duty?*¹ The question was first raised by the Congregational minister Joseph Hussey (1660–1726) in 1707 with his publication of *God's Operations of Grace: but No Offers of His Grace*,² in which he took the hyper-Calvinist³ position that to offer the gospel indiscriminately would

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¹Those answering these questions in the affirmative would be advocates of what might be called "duty faith," i.e., the obligation of everyone to believe the gospel of Christ.

²This was reprinted by Primitive Publications, Elon College, NC, in 1973.

³Some prefer the less pejorative term "high" Calvinism/Calvinists. I mean to use the terms "hyper" and "high" synonymously. While it is true that hyper-Calvinism has been interpreted in a variety of ways, we should consider how the expression was applied in the 18th century to opponents of Andrew Fuller and his fellow moderate or evangelical Calvinists. The term was directed against those who normally advocated the following positions or variations of them: (1) a supralapsarian decree of election which would include (2) reprobation or what John Gill called "pre-damnation"; (3) eternal justification, the doctrine that God decreed the elect *for* justification before the fall, a corollary of this logically being (4) passive faith (i.e., God grants his elect faith apart from active human volition); (5) a divine warrant or indication (usually conviction of sin) that an individual was elect prior to conversion; and (6) a distinction between preaching the gospel indiscriminately and *offering* it to those *sensible* to it (i.e.,

imply that the natural man had the innate ability to respond to it. Hussey admitted that, as far as he was able to determine, no authorities had raised the question before, but he felt constrained to do so in the face of Arminianism⁴ and its rationalist counterparts, Deism and Socinianism. All of these humanistic systems, Hussey believed, were a major threat to the doctrines of grace. The following quote from Hussey's work reflects the high Calvinism that prompted an evangelical response from more moderate Particular Baptists, such as Andrew Fuller (1754–1815):⁵

By offers of grace, tenders and proffers of salvation, it is evident, men do thereby imply that free grace and full salvation is [sic] propounded, tendered, and offered to all sinners within the sound [of the gospel].... Is not this a piece of robbery against the Holy Spirit?...does not the plea confine the operation of the Holy Spirit to common and eternal workings?

those who have a warrant that they are elect). Fuller preferred the name *pseudo-Calvinist*, since he believed that historic Calvinists would have rejected most of these features. No one would have been called hyper-Calvinist who held to the five points of Dort (TULIP). In fact, those who departed from those points usually incurred the charge of Arminianism. Hyper-Calvinists went beyond Dort and made their own tenets the test of Calvinism, so that when Fuller, in agreement with Dort, taught that the atonement was sufficient for all the world, but efficient only for the elect, he was accused of being Arminian. See "Canons of the Synod of Dort," in vol. 3 of *The Creeds of Christendom*, ed. Philip Schaff (Grand Rapids: Baker, 1983), p. 586.

⁴Arminianism was a term that carried a wide variety of meanings in Fuller's day. At the least, and according to normal historical usage, it applied to those who embraced the teachings of Jacobus Arminius (1560–1609) as expressed in the controversial five points of the Dutch Remonstrance of 1610. The Remonstrants attempted to define predestination in terms of foreknowledge and condition salvation on man's free will. All men can be saved, grace can be resisted, and those saved may not persevere in the faith but could fall from grace. Because of their emphasis on the unlimited atonement (Christ suffered for all men), they were often accused of teaching universalism. Arminius and true Arminians have taught that all men possess original sin, but that God in the atonement extended an ability by means of a prevenient grace for all men to be saved. Prevenient grace negated the disabling effects of original sin. Those who denied original sin were frequently called Arminian, but in actuality they were Pelagian. Because of its stress on human ability, Arminianism has frequently degenerated into latitudinarianism and liberalism, including Unitarianism. This is why some Unitarians, like John Taylor of Norwich, were referred to as Arminian. The Arminian General Baptists of Great Britain were almost wholly taken over by Socinianism, a form of Unitarianism, by the mid-1700s. One must realize this context when considering why Particular Baptists tended to lump Arminians, Arians, and Socinians together as the common enemy of orthodox Christianity.

⁵For an overview of Fuller's life and a brief evaluation of his theology, see Phil Roberts, "Andrew Fuller," in *Baptist Theologians*, ed. Timothy George and David S. Dockery (Nashville: Broadman, 1990), pp. 121–39. Roberts gives a comprehensive bibliography of works by and about Fuller, making it unnecessary to repeat them here.

Wherein does your plea give Jehovah the Spirit His due honour in the internal and mighty workings of His grace on sinner's hearts, that sinners may believe, repent, and be saved?⁶

The main problem of the gospel's indiscriminate offer for Hussey is that it failed to consider the imputation of Christ's righteousness to the elect, who *alone* could respond in faith: "The Spirit will not, and cannot honourably work without the imputation of Christ; but offers of Christ...without a due regard of the imputation of his righteousness, or the work of the Spirit, therefore are not fit means to work this ability [i.e., the ability to close with Christ]."⁷ Hussey said it is all right to preach the gospel, just do not make it an offer, since the non-elect have no ability in them to respond to it; otherwise, you rob the Spirit of his power, degrade the gospel, and flatter men that they have some ability to receive it.⁸ One can understand why this view was charged with antinomianism when it seems to tell man that he has no duty to respond because he has no ability. Therefore, he has no moral obligation to obey God's revelation. What Hussey (and most hyper-Calvinists) attempted to do was guard the gospel against the Arminian assertion of human ability and the Socinian view of universalism.

The modern question was revisited in 1739 by the posthumous publication of Congregationalist minister Matthias Maurice's *The Modern Question Affirm'd and Proved* in which he forsook his earlier high Calvinism to proclaim the duty of all hearers to believe the gospel of Christ. This inaugurated a pamphlet battle between the high and moderate Calvinists in which the Particular Baptists engaged most vociferously. The quarrel really heated up when John Gill (1697–1771) entered the fray with the republication in 1751 of John Skepp's 1721 work, *The Divine Energy: or the efficacious operations of the Spirit of God in the soul of man, in his effectual calling and conversion: stated, proved, and vindicated. Wherein the real weakness and insufficiency of moral persuasion, without the super-addition of the exceeding greatness of God's*

⁶Cited in Alan P. F. Sell, *The Great Debate: Calvinism, Arminianism, and Salvation* (Grand Rapids: Baker, 1983), p. 53. An avowed Calvinist himself, John Newton cautioned John Ryland, Jr. that Hussey's high Calvinism had made many "rather wise than warm, rather positive [dogmatic] than humble, rather captious than lively, and more disposed to talk of speculations than experience." When reading Hussey, Newton found that his writings contained "more bones than meat," and "are seasoned with much of an angry and self-important spirit" (Newton letter to Ryland, 16 January 1772, cited in Michael A. G. Haykin, *One Heart and One Soul: John Sutcliff of Olney, His Friends and His Times* [Durham, England: Evangelical Press, 1994], p. 81).

⁷Sell, *The Great Debate*, pp. 53–54.

⁸*Ibid.*, p. 54.

power for faith and conversion to God, are fully evinced. Being an antidote against the Pelagian plague⁹—the title providing a virtual synopsis of the work! Sell states,

So persuaded was Skepp that God must have all the glory, and that man could do nothing, that he, like Hussey before him, refused to offer the gospel lest it be thought that any but God's Holy Spirit could apply it to the heart, or that sinful man had the moral ability to respond. This was the position which Gill and [John] Brine [Gill's close friend] strenuously defended against the supporters of Mathias Maurice....¹⁰

AN EVANGELICAL BAPTIST RESPONSE TO HYPER-CALVINISM

In reacting to this extreme Calvinist approach, several Particular Baptists of a more evangelistic bent “wished both to resist Arminianism, and to proclaim the gospel more experimentally and generously than the stricter Calvinism seemed to permit.”¹¹ Among these were John Sutcliff, John Ryland, Jr., and Robert Hall, Sr. of Arnesby, whose Northamptonshire Association sermon, *Help to Zion's Travellers*, was put into print in 1781. Hall's comment that “the way to Jesus is graciously open for everyone who chooses to come to him” made a favorable impact on William Carey and Andrew Fuller. What especially aroused Fuller's attention to the issue was his reading of *The Modern Question Concerning Repentance and Faith Examined*, first published in 1735 by Particular Baptist and duty faith advocate Abraham Taylor. Fuller, having been reared in a strict Particular Baptist church whose pastor was “noninvitational,” began wrestling with the modern question in earnest. He was not at all satisfied with Gill's and Brine's separate rebuttals of Taylor's work in 1738 and 1743 respectively. Gill was

⁹Skepp was Gill's close friend and mentor. He had been a member of Gill's ordination council, and encouraged Gill in his pursuit of Hebrew studies. Sell reminds us that, “above all, Skepp had been a member of Hussey's church at Cambridge and his own theological stance is adequately described by the title of his book” [cited above] (Sell, *The Great Debate*, p. 78).

¹⁰Sell, *The Great Debate*, p. 78. Attempts to make Gill less the hyper-Calvinist than either Skepp or Brine have been unconvincing. The latter two ministers may have been more dogmatic in drawing a contrast between gospel preaching and offer, but as Walter Wilson stated, both Gill and Brine enjoyed “a perfect congeniality of views upon religious subjects. Their common inspirer was John Skepp” (*History and Antiquities of Dissenting Churches...in London* [1808–14], 2:574–75, cited in Geoffrey F. Nuttall, “Northamptonshire and *The Modern Question*: A Turning-Point in Eighteenth-Century Dissent,” *Journal of Theological Studies* 16 [1965]: 117; cf. p. 118 ff).

¹¹Sell, *The Great Debate*, pp. 54–55.

zealous in his attempt to clear himself and his high Calvinist party of antinomianism: "For my part I have been traduced as an Antinomian, for innocently asserting that the essence of justification...lies in the will of God—I *abhor* the thoughts of setting the law of God aside as the rule of walk and conversation; and constantly affirm...that all who believe in Christ for righteousness should be careful to maintain good works, for necessary uses."¹² But he was hard put to throw off the yoke of antinomianism especially due to his promotion of two distinguishing marks of supralapsarian Calvinism—reprobation and eternal justification.¹³ Gill was suggesting that if God had chosen and condemned the non-elect before the Fall, and had not only determined the elect but justified them in eternity past, then what is the point of *offering* the gospel indiscriminately? By this extreme view Gill was trying to buttress his case for perseverance of the saints against John Wesley's denial of it and accusations against him (Gill) of antinomianism. Not only

¹²John Rippon, *A Brief Memoir of the Life and Writings of the late Rev. John Gill, D.D.* (London: n.p., 1838), p. 56.

¹³There have been fairly recent attempts from two different camps to rescue John Gill from the charge of hyper-Calvinism: those who are evangelical Calvinists who wish to see in Gill an essential theological kinship with Fuller and those hyper-Calvinists who disdain Fullerism in favor of Gill, who they believe was a consistent Calvinist. The first group, associated with the Founders movement within the SBC, is represented by Tom Ascol, Timothy George, and Tom Nettles. See respectively, "The Doctrine of Grace: A Critical Analysis of Federalism in the Theologies of John Gill and Andrew Fuller" (Ph.D. thesis, Southwestern Baptist Theological Seminary, 1989); "John Gill," in *Baptist Theologians*, ed. Timothy George and David S. Dockery (Nashville: Broadman, 1990), pp. 77–101; and *By His Grace and for His Glory: A Historical, Theological, and Practical Study of the Doctrines of Grace in Baptist Life* (Grand Rapids: Baker, 1986), pp. 73–107. See also Michael Haykin, *One Heart and One Soul*, pp. 17–19. The second group is represented by the Strict Baptist Historical Society and the *Gospel Standard* in Great Britain. Most notable among them is George M. Ella. See his *John Gill and the Cause of God and Truth* (Durham, England: Go Publications, 1995), wherein he attempts to exonerate Gill from the charge of hyper-Calvinism. A more defensible interpretation of Gill is by Robert W. Oliver with "John Gill (1697–1771)," in vol. 1 of *The British Particular Baptists 1638–1910*, ed. Michael A. G. Haykin (Springfield, MO: Particular Baptist Press, 1998), pp. 144–165, wherein he gives evidence that Gill was indeed a hyper-Calvinist. See also his critique of Nettles's view of Gill with "By His Grace and for His Glory," in *Banner of Truth* 284 (May 1987): 30–32. The most exhaustive treatment in favor of Gill's hyper-Calvinism is Curt Daniel, "Hyper-Calvinism and John Gill" (Ph.D. dissertation, University of Edinburgh, 1983). While it could be argued that Gill did not go beyond what Calvin himself taught on reprobation, he nevertheless cannot be excused from promoting a spirit at odds with the missionary mandate. Gill's successor, Charles Spurgeon, could recommend his predecessor's orthodoxy as a corrective to heresy, but could also acknowledge the chilling effect this "Coryphaeus of hyper-Calvinism" had on evangelism (*Commenting and Commentaries* [London: Passmore & Alabaster, 1876], p. 9).

was Gill unable to shake free of Wesley but he faced similar accusations from his own Particular Baptist denomination. What troubled Robert Hall and certainly Andrew Fuller was the fact that, for all his assertions of *proclaiming* the gospel to everyone, Gill undervalued the *general* call when insisting upon the *effectual* call. As E. F. Clipsham put it, “Gill...went to great lengths to explain away the meaning of ‘all’ wherever it occurs in connection with the universal proclamation of the gospel, and studiously avoided the direct commands and exhortations in the Bible [for all men] to repent and believe on Christ and be saved.”¹⁴ Since Gill believed that Christ died only for the elect, then the “all” of Scripture should be interpreted as all the elect (or those justified from eternity past), not all the world.¹⁵

THE GOSPEL WORTHY OF ALL ACCEPTATION: FORMATIVE INFLUENCES AND BASIC PROPOSITIONS

For Fuller and his evangelical friends, “all” meant *all* men! As a devout Particular Baptist, he had to be careful how he approached the subject, however. He wanted to give no quarter to Arminians or Socinians by even suggesting universalism. And he definitely was not happy with Gillism, which was killing evangelism, yet he wished to maintain the doctrines of Reformed soteriology in no uncertain terms.¹⁶ He had struggled long and hard with the modern question,

¹⁴“Andrew Fuller and Fullerism,” *Baptist Quarterly* 20 (July 1963): 102. Clipsham is citing Gill’s *Cause of God and Truth*, 3rd ed. (London: n.p., 1772), pp. 42, 53, 72, 317, 339.

¹⁵For example, Gill wrote on 2 Cor 5:14–15: “That the text does not say that Christ died for *all men*, but for *all*; and therefore, agreeable to other scriptures [Matt 1:21; John 10:15; Eph 5:25; Heb 2:9, 10], may be understood of *all the people* whom Jesus saves from their sins.... That it is said in the latter part of the text, that those for whom Christ died, for them also he rose again; who therefore ought to live.... Christ died for no more nor for others than those for whom he rose again; such for whom he rose again, he rose for their justification; if Christ rose for the justification of all men, all men would be justified, or the end of Christ’s resurrection would not be answered; but all men are not, nor will be justified; some will be condemned: it follows, that Christ did not rise from the dead for all men, and consequently did not die for all men” (*Cause of God and Truth*, pp. 42–43).

¹⁶Despite Fuller’s attempt at precision, he only muddied the doctrinal waters of soteriology when he sought to describe the atonement in terms that suggested a moral or governmental, rather than a penal, view. In opposition to the Anselmian commercial theory, one that fit hyper-Calvinist particularism quite well, Fuller defines atonement as Christ’s “obedience unto death,” ...answering “every end of moral government, and [opening]...a way by which God could honorably...pardon the sinner.” “Sin is only a debt in a metaphorical sense; properly speaking, it is a *crime*, and satisfaction for it requires to be made, not on pecuniary, but on moral principles” (Fuller, *Atonement*

and finally produced his version of it in a landmark work that helped launch the modern missions movement—*The Gospel Worthy of All Acceptation*.¹⁷ In his preface Fuller candidly listed the various influences which prompted him to write what he knew would be a controversial work.

- 1) Reading the missionary exploits of John Elliot and David Brainerd, missionaries to the American Indians. Their apostolic witness to the heathen was forceful and indiscriminate—all needed to be saved.
- 2) A respected friend's view of unbelief as willful rejection of the revealed truth of God.
- 3) His own personal deliberate conclusion that the opposite of unbelief was a sure "persuasion of the truth of what God has said" in his Word.
- 4) Reaction to Sandemanianism that faith is only a general or formal assent to Christian doctrine. And probably most decisive, was the influence of
- 5) Jonathan Edwards's *Freedom of the Will* in which Edwards made a distinction between natural and moral ability. Fuller "found much

of Christ and Justification of the Sinner, arranged from the writings of the Rev. Andrew Fuller by the editor of his complete works [New York: American Tract Society, 1854], pp. 72–73). A close examination of Fuller's writings, however, indicates that he was opposing a literal numericalism in favor of a penal suffering which gave infinite moral value to the atonement sufficient to expiate the sins of the whole world. Fuller's problem is more semantical than substantive. A similar problem exists in his attempt to explain imputation as figurative, rather than "proper or real." But, again, his comments must be taken in the context of opposition to hyper-Calvinism which, in this case, made of Christ an *actual* guilty criminal and the justified sinner a possessor of inherent, rather than imputed, righteousness. Fuller's mistake was in his unfortunate use of terms, not in teaching heresy. Among those who are critical of Fuller's doctrine are William Rushton, *A Defense of Particular Redemption, wherein the doctrine of Andrew Fuller relative to the Atonement of Christ is tried by the Word of God* (revised ed., Elon College, NC: Primitive Publications, 1973), and George M. Ella, *Law and Gospel in the Theology of Andrew Fuller* (Durham, England: Go Publications, 1996). Although not without its problems, a plausible explanation in support of Fuller's orthodoxy may be found in Nettles' *By His Grace and for His Glory*, pp. 121–30.

¹⁷The full title is *The Gospel Worthy of All Acceptation, or the Duty of Sinners to Believe in Jesus Christ*. The first edition was published in 1785 and the second revised edition appeared in 1801. If Carey's *Enquiry Into the Obligations of Christians to Use Means for the Conversion of the Heathen* (1792) was the ethical impetus for the missions movement, Fuller's *Gospel Worthy* was the doctrinal basis for it. Whereas Fuller made it a duty for sinners to accept the gospel, Carey obligated Christians to take the gospel to them.

satisfaction in this distinction.”¹⁸

Fuller also listed seven premises which would form the structure of his argument. Wisely, he juxtaposed them against those positions he held in common with his fellow Particular Baptists:

- 1) His argument was not against unconditional election, the cause of salvation, but the cause of damnation—man’s own unwillingness to be saved. Man is an unbeliever because “he will be so.”
- 2) Only the redeemed are entitled to the blessings of the gospel; the unredeemed are presently under the curse of sin.
- 3) “The question is not whether men are bound to do any thing more than the law requires, but whether the law, as the invariable standard of right and wrong, does not require every man cordially to embrace whatever God reveals,” beginning with the greatest commandment of loving God wholeheartedly.
- 4) “The question is not whether men are required to believe any more than is reported in the gospel, or any thing that is not true; but whether that which is reported ought not to be believed with all the heart, and whether this be not saving faith.”
- 5) And surely the crux of his entire argument: “It is no part of the controversy whether unconverted sinners be able to turn to God, and to embrace the gospel; but what kind of inability they lie under with respect to these exercises; whether it consists in the want of natural powers and advantages, or merely in the want of a heart to make a right use of them.”¹⁹
- 6) It is not an issue as to the requirement of faith for justification, but whether or not faith is the divinely “appointed *means* of salvation.”
- 7) “Finally, the question is not whether unconverted sinners be the subjects of exhortation, but whether they ought to be exhorted to perform spiritual duties.”²⁰

These positions clearly place Andrew Fuller in the camp of evangelical Calvinism. Yet the hyper-Calvinists would take issue with most

¹⁸From the 1801 edition of *Gospel Worthy*, in *The Complete Works of the Rev. Andrew Fuller with a Memoir of His Life*, ed. Andrew Gunton Fuller (London: Henry G. Bohn, 1856), p. 151. Hereafter this edition will simply be referred to as *Works*.

¹⁹With this premise Fuller advances what I believe is a false assumption. He suggests that in order for man to be obligated to accept the gospel he must have the ability to do so. It is this issue that I plan to address in the following pages.

²⁰*Works*, p. 151.

of them, building their case on the supposition that, since man is incapable of responding to the gospel, that is, he *cannot* be saved, then he is not duty bound to obey it. Faith, therefore, is not a duty, it is only and absolutely a supernatural gift. Otherwise, saving faith is the work of a dead man. Nettles states that, unlike Hussey and Brine, Gill did consider it the duty of lost persons to be saved; in other words, Gill taught duty faith. However (and Nettles admits this), the duty is in the obligation of the unregenerate to receive the revelation they hear, not in the minister to *offer* them the gospel. Nettles writes of Gill, "Although no minister has the authority to offer salvation to any,... 'yet they may preach the gospel of salvation to all men, and declare, that whosoever believes shall be saved....' The relation between an 'offer of grace' and the proclamation of the gospel is another important aspect of understanding Gill."²¹ Indeed, it is! According to Gill, ministers can only preach the gospel, not offer it. That false distinction is exactly what Fuller was combating. The distinction can be further clarified by George's two citations from Gill. The *first* quote is from an admonition to young ministers to "preach the gospel of salvation to all men." George then compares this to a *second* comment by Gill, a charge to an ordination candidate: "Some sensible to sin and danger,...are crying out, What shall we do to be saved? You are to observe, and point out Christ...to them.... Your work is to lead men, under a sense of sin and guilt, to the blood of Christ."²² But for Gill these statements have two entirely different applications: the first has to do with preaching the gospel to all men, the second with offering it to those who are *sensible* to it, that is, the elect. Oliver is one of the few readers of Gill who observes this distinction, but it is a very important one, in that it helps explain how Gill can be "evangelistic" and at the same time hyper-Calvinistic.²³ If this distinction between indiscriminate preaching and limited offer is not made then we have Gill in a gross contradiction. Gill was *not* teaching duty faith in the same sense as Fuller. Indeed, Fuller was combating the very thing Gill was advocating.²⁴ Fuller

²¹ *By His Grace and For His Glory*, pp. 99–100.

²² George, "John Gill," pp. 93–94.

²³ See Oliver's review, "By His Grace and for His Glory," pp. 31–32; cf. Nettles, *By His Grace and for His Glory*, pp. 94–97.

²⁴ What is interesting is that, while Gill rests his argument on the particularist view of the atonement, Fuller's full offer/full obligation view is based on a provisionally unlimited atonement. The difference can be understood this way: Gill—if Christ died only for the elect, then one should not offer the gospel indiscriminately; Fuller—if Christ died effectually for the elect but sufficiently for the whole world, then we can and should offer the gospel to everyone. Fuller was right.

believed that on his side was the strongest defense of all—the argument of Scripture wherein all unregenerate men are constantly exhorted to trust in a living Savior. Fuller did not endear himself to the hyper-Calvinists when he added, “If, therefore, there be any professors of Christianity who question the propriety of this, and who would have nothing said to them, except that, ‘if they be elected they will be called,’ they are not to be reasoned with, but rebuked, as setting themselves in direct opposition to the word of God.”²⁵ He then proceeded to remove any possible doubt as to his final intention:

The greater part of those who may differ from the author on these subjects, it is presumed, will admit the propriety of sinners being exhorted to duty; only this duty must, as they suppose, be confined to merely natural exercises, or such as may be complied with by a carnal heart, destitute of the love of God. It is one design of the following pages to show that God requires the heart, the whole heart, and nothing but the heart; that, instead of its being true that sinners are obliged to perform duties which have no spirituality in them, there are no such duties to be performed; and that, so far from their being exhorted to every thing excepting what is spiritually good, they are exhorted to nothing else. The Scriptures undoubtedly require them to read, to hear, to repent, and to pray, that their sins may be forgiven them. It is not, however, in the exercise of a carnal, but of a spiritual state of mind, that these duties are performed.²⁶

What constitutes a major difference between Fuller and the hyper-Calvinists is that he believed that the general call, not the effectual call, required the duty to respond to the gospel. Only the effectual call enabled one to do so. In Part I of his treatise, Fuller seeks to prove this from such Scripture passages as John 20:31 and 1 Pet 2:7. Believing on Christ is not merely an offer but an obligation. But to Fuller revelation is tantamount to commandment, and therefore revelation includes obligation. Fuller reasoned “that [if] it is the duty of every man to believe what God reveals,” then every man has the duty to accept the gospel, especially since this is God’s *greatest* revelation.²⁷ This allows him to utilize gospel offer passages in the Bible as scriptural injunctions (e.g., John 3:16; 12:36; Rom 10:9). Duty faith is the constant

²⁵*Works*, p. 152. No doubt Fuller had in mind the now famous response to Carey’s proposal to take the gospel to the heathen nations at a Northampton ministers meeting in 1787. John Ryland, Sr. replied, “Young man, sit down! When God pleases to convert the heathen, He will do it without your aid or mine.”

²⁶*Ibid.* This paragraph is the summary thesis of Fuller’s entire work, the *Gospel Worthy*.

²⁷*Ibid.*

refrain throughout *The Gospel Worthy* and it forms the heart of "Fullerism."

WHAT CONSTITUTES SAVING FAITH?

Fuller rightly states that salvific faith is not primarily concerned with personal security or happiness, but its grand object, Jesus Christ and his glory. "It is the peculiar property of true faith to endear Christ."²⁸ He also counters the hyper-Calvinist view that there must be an obvious "warrant" or interest in salvation by the elect prior to conversion. Such a warrant would amount to a type of prevenient grace before saving grace.²⁹ "The gospel contains no *gift* or *grant* to mankind in general.... It warrants every sinner to believe in Christ for salvation, but no one to conclude himself interested in salvation till he has believed; consequently, such a conclusion, even where it is well-founded, cannot be faith, but that which follows it."³⁰ Fuller identifies faith quite specifically. He admits of Abraham Booth's definition, that "faith in Christ [is] a *dependence* on him, a *receiving* him, a *coming* to him and *trusting in him* for salvation." But this is not precise enough for Fuller. He prefers to see these elements not as integral to faith, but as "immediate effects of faith itself."³¹ And this leads us to a second consideration: what constitutes saving faith for Fuller? Faith is, first of all, an activity of the mind—an active, not a passive, mind. He bases this on Hebrews 11:6. "Here are three different exercises of the mind: First, believing *that God is*; Secondly, believing that he is *a rewarder of them that diligently seek him*; Thirdly, *coming* to him: and the last is represented as the effect of the former two. The same may be applied to Christ."³² Fuller prefers the term *trust* to capture the essence of saving faith. This term is best adapted "to express the confidence which the soul reposes in Christ for the fulfillment of his *promises*."³³ Fuller argues that trust has an essential relation to revealed truth. To call into question by refusing to believe God's revelation is to impugn the

²⁸Ibid., p. 153.

²⁹It is this kind of reasoning by the hyper-Calvinists that places them ironically in agreement with the Arminians! Fuller frequently takes advantage of this paradoxical relationship to prove that hyper-Calvinists are in reality *pseudo*-Calvinists.

³⁰*Works*, p. 153. All italicized words in Fuller's quotations are his own.

³¹Ibid., p. 156.

³²Ibid.

³³Ibid.

integrity of his promises. “And from hence it will follow, that trusting in Christ, no less than crediting his testimony, is the *duty* of every sinner to whom the revelation is made.”³⁴ Warrant, then, for Fuller is the gospel offer itself, which makes incumbent an obligation to be saved, not evidence that one will be saved.

But secondly, if faith is a duty, it must be exercised in a way pleasing to God; this demands that it be holy. “God requires nothing of intelligent creatures but what is holy.”³⁵ If it is holy, then it will be genuine faith, and sufficient to carry us to heaven. By identifying faith this way, Fuller is combating the error of Sandemanianism, espoused by Scottish Baptist Alexander McLean, who taught that faith is a mere profession, or intellectual assent to the gospel. Saving faith must be holy in nature, that is, there must be a godly disposition of the heart for it to be genuine. This active inclination of the heart is wrought supernaturally by the gracious work of the Holy Spirit which gives glory to God. Finally, to be a holy propensity it must necessarily include repentance, “for repentance without faith could not please God.”³⁶

REGENERATION PRECEDES FAITH

To Fuller, the only way for faith to be holy is for God through his Word to regenerate the heart prior to believing. He writes,

The...question is in what *order* these things are caused. Whether the Holy Spirit causes the mind, while carnal, to discern and believe spiritual things, and thereby renders it spiritual; or whether he imparts a holy susceptibility and relish for the truth, in consequence of which we discern its glory, and embrace it. The latter appears to me to be the truth. The following are the principal grounds on which I embrace it.³⁷

Fuller then proceeds to lay out his reasons for regeneration preceding faith and repentance:

- 1) “The Scriptures represent the dominion of sin in the heart as *utterly inconsistent* with a spiritual perception and belief of the gospel.... Hence it will follow that the Holy Spirit must remove the obstacle of unbelief, so that spiritual things may be spiritually discerned.”

³⁴Ibid.

³⁵Ibid., p. 180.

³⁶Ibid., p. 181.

³⁷Ibid., p. 187.

- 2) "Though holiness is frequently ascribed in the Scriptures to a spiritual perception of the truth, yet that...perception itself...is ascribed to the influence of the Holy Spirit upon the heart: 'The Lord *opened the heart* of Lydia, and she attended to the things which were spoken of Paul.'" In addition, Fuller cites as proof texts 2 Corinthians 4:6; 1 John 2:27; and 1 John 2:20.
- 3) "Every thing which proves spiritual perception and faith to be holy exercises also proves that a change of heart must of necessity precede them, as no holy exercise can have place while the heart is under the dominion of carnality."³⁸

Faith, then, is the effect of the spiritual influence of God upon the heart, which influence (i.e., regeneration) enables the carnal heart to have a holy sensibility toward God. If otherwise, Fuller contends, we have the absurdity of an *ungodly believer*. Yet, in the final analysis, "the truth appears to be, these things [regeneration and faith] are inseparable; and when promises are made to one, it is as connected with the other. The priority contended for is rather in order of nature than of time.... No sooner is the heart turned towards Christ [by regeneration] than Christ is embraced [in faith]."³⁹

THE SCRIPTURE CALLS FAITH A DUTY

In Part II of the *Gospel Worthy*, Fuller seeks to prove duty faith by calling upon Scripture passages that command belief: Psalm 2:11–12; Isaiah 55:1–7; Jeremiah 6:16; and John 12:36; 6:29. The hyper-Calvinist John Brine had complained that declaring to unregenerate sinners the necessity of belief for salvation is far short of making it a duty. Fuller responded that if believing were an act pleasing to God, and pleasing God by believing was necessary and acceptable to God, how could it be otherwise than a duty? As evidence, he cited John 5:23—"The Father hath committed all judgment unto the Son, that all men should honour the Son, even as they honour the Father. He that honoureth not the Son honoureth not the Father which hath sent him." Fuller contended that it is impossible to honor the Son if we reject his offices and neglect his salvation.⁴⁰ Duty faith is further illustrated in the case of Simon Magus, a man clearly unregenerate and having no "warrant" of election, yet Peter admonished him to "repent and pray to the Lord, if perhaps the thought of his heart might be

³⁸Ibid., pp. 187–88.

³⁹Ibid., p. 189.

⁴⁰Ibid., p. 158.

forgiven him.” His warrant was simply to receive Christ and it would be a sin if he did not, “for all disobedience consists in a breach of duty.”⁴¹ The question remains as to whether Simon *could* not repent and receive Christ or that he *would* not. Fuller’s answer to this question was perhaps the most controversial issue in his soteriology.

JONATHAN EDWARDS AND DICHOTOMOUS ABILITY

In order to make men fully responsible for their duty to accept Christ, Fuller borrowed Jonathan Edwards’s principle of dichotomous (moral versus natural) ability. Edwards was posing this doctrine in the context of his opposition to the Arminianism of John Taylor of Norwich, who rejected the Reformed belief of the imputation of Adam’s sin to his posterity. The denial of immediate imputation of Adam’s guilt (original sin) in favor of mediate imputation is characteristic of Arminian semi-Pelagian anthropology. To Taylor, Adam’s sin had only natural, not moral or penal consequences. Edwards countered with just the opposite view: natural man was morally corrupt, and faced the consequences of his inherent moral depravity, but his natural (mental and physical) faculties remained unchanged by the fall. However, in countering Arminian indeterminism, Edwards did not want to resort to fatalism and deprive man of free agency. His solution was moral determinism. Man will always choose that which is selfish and sinful because of a fixed moral inclination to do so as the result of original sin. Edwards kept fallen man’s freedom intact by defining it as ability to choose without natural necessity to do otherwise.⁴²

Perhaps a further explanation of how Edwards arrived at his principle of dichotomous ability will help us understand Fuller’s own argument, which he claimed was derived from Edwards. Upon his removal in 1750 from Northampton to Stockbridge, Massachusetts, Edwards began writing some of his most important theological work. One of his very first treatises, published in November 1752 as *Misrepresentations Corrected*, was a refutation of his cousin’s understanding of church membership. Solomon Williams insisted that “at the level of ‘moral sincerity’ the unregenerate can consent to the gospel and that this can be an effective step to their receiving the grace of God.” Such were acceptable as church members.⁴³ Edwards rightly countered that

⁴¹Ibid., pp. 158–60.

⁴²The concept of natural necessity will be further explained below.

⁴³Iain Murray, *Jonathan Edwards: A New Biography* (Edinburgh: Banner of Truth, 1987), p. 424.

this view undermines the doctrine of conversion and gives the communicant a false sense of security. Edwards saw in Williams's teaching a crediting of the unregenerate with ability to be accepted before a holy God—the old heresy of Pelagius.⁴⁴ This was the immediate catalyst for Edwards to write what many consider his most important theological work, *A Careful and Strict Inquiry into the Modern Prevailing Notions of that Freedom of Will which is supposed to be Essential to Moral Agency* or simply, *Freedom of the Will* (1754).⁴⁵ The purpose of the treatise was to explain that the doctrine of human responsibility was scriptural, that “necessity—the determination of the human will...—is not inconsistent with a reasonable concept of freedom or moral accountability.”⁴⁶ Edwards wanted to “demolish any suggestion that the human will is ‘self-determined’ or possessing within itself its own autonomous power of deliberating [or] choosing.” The Arminian doctrine of belief in man's ability to determine his own will is unscriptural.⁴⁷

The problem Edwards attempted to address is a perennial one and crucial to soteriology: if man is without power to repent and turn to God, how can he be held responsible for remaining in sin? If human inability is true, so it seems, then man is no longer a free agent but acts under compulsion. Edwards's answer is that man is free in the sense of possessing the faculties of moral agency—mind, will, emotion (which Edwards assimilates into “affections”)—and is therefore a responsible agent. However, man is incapable of spiritual good because of the constitutional disposition of those faculties—they are inherently and thoroughly corrupt. The acts of man's will are always dictated by his moral disposition. “The will, in every instance, acts by moral necessity.... A man is truly morally unable to choose contrary to a present inclination”⁴⁸ Man's choices are determined by his fallen nature. This

⁴⁴This view closely resembles the Roman Catholic doctrine of condign merit.

⁴⁵One of the most insightful interpretations of Edwards's *Freedom of the Will* is C. Samuel Storms, “Jonathan Edwards on the Freedom of the Will,” *TrinJ* 3 (Fall 1982): 144–45. An expansion of this article may be found in chapter four of Storms's more comprehensive work, *Tragedy in Eden: Original Sin in the Theology of Jonathan Edwards* (Lanham, MD: University Press of America, 1985), pp. 151–290.

⁴⁶Allen C. Guelzo, “The Return of the Will” in *Edwards in Our Time: Jonathan Edwards and the Shaping of American Religion*, ed. Sang Hyun Lee and Allen Guelzo (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1999), p. 89.

⁴⁷*Ibid.* Cf. Storms, “Jonathan Edwards on the Freedom of the Will,” pp. 148–56.

⁴⁸Edwards, *Freedom of the Will*, in *The Works of Jonathan Edwards*, 2 vols. (reprint ed., Edinburgh: Banner of Truth Trust, 1974), 1:50, hereafter cited as *Edwards's Works*.

inability, says Edwards, is thoroughly consistent with accountability wherein man's "exceeding guilt and sinfulness in the sight of God most fundamentally and mainly consist."⁴⁹ Man will never "will" to be pleasing to God and love Him until God first acts upon him. Regeneration was God's act; man's acts were repentance and faith. Until or unless God acted man would not. Edwards completely exploded the Pelagian notion that somehow man could apprehend God by works.

However, Edwards stops short of saying man "cannot" come to Christ because of his allowance for natural ability.⁵⁰ The bondage of man is voluntary—"he *will* not be saved." Edwards writes, "We may learn the reason why natural men will not come to Christ: they *do* not come because they *will* not come." Man has the natural capacity to make free choices: "the will is plainly, that by which the mind chooses anything," so that "an act of the will is the same as an act of choosing or choice." Assuming that there is nothing extrinsic to man compelling him in his choices (what Edwards calls natural necessity), he is volitionally free. Liberty is simply "being free from hindrance and impediment in the way of doing," so that "let the person come by his volition or choice how he will, yet, if he is able, and there is nothing in the way to hinder his pursuing and executing his will, the man is fully and perfectly free, according to the primary and common notion of freedom."⁵¹ Freedom, then, is the absence of whatever is extrinsic to my will that would compel me to do otherwise.

Man has a will that can choose. He is by nature a volitional being. He can make right choices if he wills to do so. However, he will not make the right choices because of moral corruption. The fall made him morally but not naturally corrupt, according to Edwards. There is "*no other necessity* of sinning than a moral necessity."⁵² There is true choice but never contrary choice, that is, contrary to the inclinations. Otherwise, if man is naturally unable to choose the good, then he cannot be found guilty of sin. He cannot say before the judgment seat, "I could not respond to the truth." He will have to admit, "I would not respond to it."⁵³ His will, to be free, cannot be coerced either toward sin

⁴⁹Ibid., 1:52.

⁵⁰In fairness to Edwards, he never states in *Freedom of the Will* that man possesses natural ability. This is inferred from his denial of natural inability.

⁵¹Edwards, *Freedom of the Will*, ed. Paul Ramsey, in vol. 1 of *The Works of Jonathan Edwards* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1985), pp. 163–64.

⁵²Ibid., p. 432.

⁵³Pelagians, like Finney, would say that natural man *should* (moral duty) and *can* respond (natural and moral ability).

or righteousness, but it is determined by motive, which, again, is morally corrupt. And so practically speaking, and Edwards admits this elsewhere, man has two wills—the rational will and the will of the appetite.⁵⁴ “Our first parents were...perfectly free agents with respect to their rational will; the inclinations, which we call appetites, were not above, did not keep it [sic] in subjection.”⁵⁵ The rational will had “sufficient” but not “efficient” grace to prevent the will of the appetite to be exercised in disobedience.

No amount of natural ability can save a soul because of the moral impossibility to do so. “Hence we may learn that *it is impossible for men to convert themselves* by their own strength and industry, with only a concurring assistance helping in the exercise of their natural abilities and principles of the soul, and securing their improvement.”⁵⁶ We have no final ability “to make ourselves holy or work any holy inclination or affections or exert any one holy act any more than a dead body can raise itself to life.”⁵⁷ “Tis entirely in man’s power to submit to Jesus Christ as a Saviour if he will, but the thing is, it never will be he should will it, except that God works it in him: It depends on will not on power. Many things are in our power that are impossible because of our disposition.”⁵⁸ However, by suggesting that man is morally but not naturally incapable, Edwards appears to be teaching partial depravity.⁵⁹

⁵⁴Edwards, Misc 436, *Works of Jonathan Edwards*, 13:484.

⁵⁵Ibid., p. 485.

⁵⁶Edwards, *Treatise on Grace*, pp. 37–38, cited in Gerstner, *Rational Biblical Theology of Jonathan Edwards*, 2:355.

⁵⁷Edwards, unpublished MS sermon on Rom 5:6, cited in Gerstner, *Rational Biblical Theology of Jonathan Edwards*, 2:356.

⁵⁸Edwards, Misc 710, cited in Gerstner, *Rational Biblical Theology of Jonathan Edwards*, 2:271.

⁵⁹Gary Long disagrees that Edwards’s distinction between natural ability and moral inability locks him into partial depravity. “Though Edwards did distinguish natural ability from moral inability, he meant nothing by it than the fact that man, in the fall, did not lose any of his constitutional faculties—a truth maintained by all Reformed theologians.... Shedd, one of the best theological interpreters of Edwards, says that ‘natural *ability* for Edwards, is the possession of the requisite mental faculties viewed *apart* from their moral state and condition.’... It is not denied that Edwards’ abstract distinction between natural ability and moral inability has led to ambiguity among those who professedly followed him” (“The Doctrine of Original Sin in the New England Theology from Jonathan Edwards to Edwards Amasa Park” [Th.D. Dissertation, Dallas Theological Seminary, 1972], p. 64, n. 4). Long, however, does not cite Shedd accurately. After the single comment Long mentions above, Shedd adds, “In so viewing them [man’s faculties] he [Edwards] differs from the elder Calvinists, who regarded a mental faculty and its moral condition as inseparable. Edwards

If Edwards only cracked open the doorway of human ability, the New Divinity men opened it wider until Nathaniel Taylor took the door of inability off its hinges and cast it aside.

Did Edwards really teach *partial* depravity? In his treatise on *Original Sin* and elsewhere he boldly declares for *total* depravity.

They [unregenerate men] are totally corrupt, in every part, in all their faculties; in all the principles of their nature, their understanding, and wills; and in all their dispositions and affections. Their heads, their hearts, are totally depraved; all the members of their bodies are only instruments of sin; and all their senses, seeing, hearing, tasting, &c. are only inlets and outlets of sin, channels of corruption.⁶⁰

Such a statement seems to leave no room for partial depravity. Then why make a distinction between moral and natural ability at all? Shedd explains,

The real question is, whether the sinner can originate the “thing that is wanting” in order to obedience: namely, “a being willing,” or a disposition to obey. Edwards always and everywhere asserts that he cannot; but for the purpose of meeting the objection that if the sinner is unable to obey he is not obligated to obey, he contends that it is improper to call the inability to “be willing” or inclined, an inability, because the mere existence of the faculty of will without the power to change its disposition constitutes ability. “To ascribe a non-performance,” says Edwards, “in these things, to the want of power is not just; because the thing wanting is not a being able, but a being willing. There are faculties of mind, and a capacity of nature, and everything sufficient but a *disposition*.” But the absence of a disposition to obey is fatal.⁶¹

Edwards maintains natural ability because he wants to make each man *personally* responsible for his own sin. Man will never be able to say, “I could not respond to the gospel.” Natural ability gives man a choice; moral inability determines what choices he will make—the wrong ones. What Edwards did not want to do is to give any room for man excusing himself from turning to Christ because he *could* not do so.

conceives of the will abstractly and separate from its inclination, and as so conceived contends that it is ‘naturally able’ to obey the law of God. The elder Calvinists denied that the will can be so conceived of” (William G. T. Shedd, *Dogmatic Theology*, 3 vols., reprint ed. [Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 1969], 2:220 [cf. 219–29]).

⁶⁰Discourse IV: “The Justice of God in the Damnation of Sinners,” in *Edwards’s Works*, 1:670.

⁶¹Shedd, *Dogmatic Theology*, 2:223.

It is no excuse, that you cannot receive Christ of yourself, unless you *would* if you could.... Certainly if persons would not if they could, it is just the same thing as to the blame that lies upon them, whether they can or cannot. If you were willing, and then found that you could not, your being unable would alter the case, and might be some excuse; because then the defect would not be in your will, but only in your ability. But as long as you *will* not, it is no matter, whether you have ability or no ability.... If you are not willing to accept Christ, it follows that you have no sincere willingness to be willing.⁶²

What, then, is the answer to the objection why man is to blame for what he cannot do? "Men are under no such inability to any moral good required of them as is owing to any defect in the capacity of their nature."⁶³ Again, "No man is condemned properly not because he is unable but because he is unwilling."⁶⁴

Because Edwards was so adamantly opposed to any form of human indeterminism and autosoterism and because he strongly affirmed total depravity in *Original Sin*, some theologians have argued that he should not have ever written *Freedom of the Will*.⁶⁵ He didn't need to; the former treatise was sufficient to combat Arminianism. Positing a dichotomy between natural and moral ability only served to create confusion among interpreters of Edwards. In wrestling with the difficulty and perhaps risking the charge of presumption, Gerstner proposes that what we end up with Edwards is no real dichotomy at all, but a compatibility.

Edwards' assertion notwithstanding,...in his thought moral inability is a natural inability. His whole psychology is based on the fact that we must have an inclination in order to choose in a particular way. His doctrine of the fall and the complete obliteration of the moral image in man means that the inclination to virtue has been totally erased. That is the same thing as to say man no longer has any natural ability to incline to God. Edwards keeps insisting that he does have a natural ability "if he will." But the "if he will" implies if he is inclined, but he cannot incline without an inclination. This inclination is totally lacking according to Edwards' own view of man the sinner.⁶⁶

⁶²Edwards's *Works*, p. 676.

⁶³Edwards, Unpublished MS sermon on Rom 5:6, cited in Gerstner, *Rational Biblical Theology of Jonathan Edwards* 2:356.

⁶⁴Ibid.

⁶⁵Cf. Storms, "Jonathan Edwards on the Freedom of the Will," p. 141.

⁶⁶Gerstner, *Rational Biblical Theology of Jonathan Edwards*, 2:357.

FULLER'S INABILITY/ABILITY DOCTRINE

Whereas Edwards was attempting to guard Calvinist orthodoxy against Arminianism, Fuller was arguing his case for moral necessity on two fronts: against the hyper-Calvinists on the one hand (represented by the followers of Gill and Brine) and the Arminians on the other hand (represented by Dan Taylor, leader of the New Connection General Baptists). And whereas Edwards appears to have been influenced by Williams Ames's dichotomous arrangement of theology (which Ames called technometry) in his *Marrow of Theology*,⁶⁷ Fuller was persuaded by both Edwards and Edwards's pupil, Joseph Bellamy, to accept the moral inability/natural ability model.⁶⁸ What both Edwards and Fuller were combating was essentially the same thing: the antinomian element of the modern question, that is, "if there be no power in fallen man to keep the divine law there is no obligation to keep it."⁶⁹ In order to disprove this premise, Fuller adapted Edwards's dichotomous ability model as a basis for his validation of duty faith.

Guiding Fuller's thought in much of his argumentation is the concept that all virtue consists of benevolence (or unselfish love, a prominent feature of New England theology), and sin is the absence of benevolence. Such statements as the following appear frequently in the *Gospel Worthy*: "It is owing to a want of love to God that any man continue impenitent or unbelieving."⁷⁰ It is due to man's unwillingness to love God, not any natural inability, that indicts him. In quoting John McLaurin's⁷¹ *Essay on Grace*, Fuller agrees that "Where it [love]

⁶⁷Edwards often began with the thought of William Ames. For example, he found Ames's discussion of assurance and true humility in worship in *Cases of Conscience* to be helpful in his writing of *A Treatise Concerning Religious Affections* (Part II, Section XI and Part III, Section X). His principle of dichotomous ability in *Freedom of the Will* could very well have been influenced by Ames.

⁶⁸Michael Haykin calls this distinction a *physical* ability versus a moral inability ("Andrew Fuller [1754–1815] and the Free Offer of the Gospel," *Reformation Today* 182 [July–Aug 2001]: 25) because Fuller himself frequently equates natural and physical. Fuller considers man's rational processes (intelligence, reasoning, etc.) as essential elements of man's physical being. He evidently follows Edwards by including the understanding as part of "natural" (apart from "moral") man. Both men fail to distinguish the mind as part of man's immaterial being (his soul), not his material (i.e., natural) body. This underscores a major flaw in the dichotomous ability model.

⁶⁹Shedd, *Dogmatic Theology*, 2:222.

⁷⁰*Works*, p. 161.

⁷¹McLaurin, an evangelical pastor from the Scottish lowlands, was instrumental in inaugurating the famous "Concert of Prayer" for revival, beginning in 1744

does not beget conviction, it is not owing to the weakness of men's capacities; but the strength of their prejudices and prepossessions."⁷² To Fuller "whatever is not a sinner's duty, the omission of it cannot be charged on him as a sin, nor imputed to any depravity in him."⁷³ It follows, therefore, that the duty of loving God requires ability in order for man to be held accountable. He further argues that if the inability of sinners to believe in Christ (a virtual equivalent of loving God) be likened to the impossibility of a corpse to rise up and walk, "it were absurd to suppose that they would...fall under the Divine censure."⁷⁴ Here I must take exception with Fuller. The Bible states that this is precisely what sinners are—dead in trespasses and sins, according to Ephesians 2:1. Fuller states that "no man is reprov'd for not doing that which is naturally impossible,"⁷⁵ and yet Paul clearly tells us that dead sinners are under the wrath of God and deserving of his punishment (vv. 2–3). It is as much a miracle to regenerate a sinner as to resuscitate a corpse. And that is exactly what regeneration is, a monergistic miracle by a sovereign God to enable man to do what is otherwise impossible to do—love God. To allow man any vestige of human ability in salvation is to deny total depravity, the pervasive quality of guilt and sin, and the fact that salvation is totally of divine grace. Fuller, however, reasons that "if sinners were naturally and absolutely unable to believe in Christ, they would be equally unable to disbelieve; for it requires the same powers to reject as to embrace."⁷⁶ But this is a *non sequitur* argument, and Fuller uses it often. In this case, the unbeliever is unable to believe. It is illogical to suggest that he could have some ability to believe. The point is that the unbeliever has no facility to believe since he is in a *state* of unbelief. Being unable to disbelieve (or simply to believe) is not an option in such a state. Using Fuller's line of reasoning we could just as easily say of the Pharisees, a group who would not accept the gospel, that they had at one time in their lives the ability and the willingness to receive it but had now *become* hardened to the point of wanting to reject it. They formerly had the power to believe, but having hardened their hearts, they lost the power. The point is they already stood before a holy God as guilty sinners, never

(Haykins, *One Heart and One Soul*, p. 159).

⁷²*Works*, p. 161.

⁷³*Ibid.*, p. 162.

⁷⁴*Ibid.*

⁷⁵*Ibid.*

⁷⁶*Ibid.*

having had any power. Their guilt is only compounded by their rejection of him. But when did they become guilty? At the time of their rejection? Hardly. They were guilty from birth. To say otherwise is to beg the question of total depravity.

Fuller constantly defines sin and unbelief in terms of voluntary transgression. Of course, sin is that, and Fuller builds his case on Scripture passages that affirm this, but he either misinterprets or neglects those passages which prove that the reason man will not believe is because he cannot do so. For example, he states that “a voluntary and judicial blindness, obstinacy, and hardness of heart, are represented as the bar to conversion.” This is true but it fails to consider *original* sin—the sin with which we are all born, the imputed sin of Adam, that *causes* us to commit sinful acts. Fuller goes so far as to say that “nothing can be sin which is not a breach of duty.”⁷⁷ This is dangerously close to Taylorism, that limits sin to voluntary transgression of a known law. Such a statement fails to consider the full implications of original sin.

AN EVALUATION: CONSENSUS AND DISSENSUS

Fuller writes truly when he tells us that it is the duty of the unregenerate to trust Christ. Paul declares this emphatically in Acts 17:30—“Therefore having overlooked the times of ignorance, God is now declaring to men that all *people* everywhere should repent.”⁷⁸ But to suggest that duty requires human ability takes his argument beyond the bounds of orthodoxy, and overlooks the fact that we are all *born* sinners and come into this world having sufficient guilt to condemn us “because all sinned” in Adam (Rom 5:12). Andrew Fuller’s failure is to properly acknowledge the *condition* of man due to original imputed sin. It is true that rejecting Christ compounds man’s guilt, but the reason he does not and, in fact, cannot receive Christ is because he comes into the world with the guilt of Adam and inherent moral depravity which has defiled *all* of his faculties, and which prevent him from responding. Is he still responsible even though he cannot respond? Most assuredly he is, and he stands guilty for not responding. But he became legally guilty when Adam, his federal representative head, sinned in the Garden. It is the doctrine of imputation that is so crucial to

⁷⁷Ibid., p. 163.

⁷⁸All Scripture citations are from the *New American Standard Bible*, 1995 update, with the exception of the passages from the Authorized (King James) Version quoted by Fuller himself. Amazingly, Fuller never once cites Acts 17:30 as a proof text in support of duty faith in *Gospel Worthy*.

understanding man's culpability and his inability to respond to the gospel. And Fuller fails to adequately treat this. He instead falls back on moral inability and defines total depravity only in those terms, which leaves him open to the criticism of teaching partial depravity. But, in fact, we are accountable before a holy God for both original guilt and voluntary sin.⁷⁹ To neglect the former in favor of the latter is to make a serious concession to Pelagianism and mediate imputation, which is really no imputation at all. Yet Fuller attempts to rescue himself from such an indictment while answering the claims of Arminianism following the first publication of the *Gospel Worthy*. When Dan Taylor first read it, he thought he had a "soul mate" in Fuller, and began publishing his sentiments under the pseudonym Philanthropos. Fuller, however, attempted to set the record straight that he was not in agreement with Taylor in a series of replies refuting Taylor's Arminianism. In doing so, Fuller does come out in favor of immediate imputation of Adam's sin to his posterity. Following this, he attempts in Edwardsean fashion to explain what he meant by natural inability in the *Gospel Worthy*:

The depravity of our hearts is not owing to natural weakness, either of body or mind, nor yet to the want of opportunity to know and glorify God. When we speak of it as being the *sin of our nature*, we use the term in a very different sense from what we do when speaking of *natural* inability. By the *sin of our nature*, we mean not any thing which belongs to our nature as human, but what is, by the fall, so interwoven with it as if it were, though in fact it is not a part of it; and so deeply rooted in our souls as to become *natural*, as it were, to us.⁸⁰

I believe we would be hard pressed to find a better, more orthodox, explanation of man's natural sinful condition than this. Edwards undoubtedly would have concurred. It preserves intact the *imago dei* in man but accounts also for the pervasive and pernicious effects of sin to the point that man is *naturally* a sinner. Yet when we compare this statement with a comment Fuller makes in a letter written in 1795, we find that he has forced himself into a serious contradiction. Fuller is

⁷⁹The justice of God's condemnation of men on the basis of original sin is born out by Zacharias Ursinus's argument: "Objection 5. They who cannot but sin, are unjustly punished; but the unregenerate cannot but sin: therefore God doth unjustly punish them. Answer: They who necessarily sin are unjustly punished, except that necessity come *voluntarily*, and *by their own will*. But men have drawn upon them that necessity voluntarily in the first parents, and themselves do willingly sin. Therefore, God doth justly punish them" (from *Christian Religion*, Question 8, cited in Shedd, *Dogmatic Theology*, 2:222, n. 1).

⁸⁰*Works*, p. 217.

describing total depravity to a friend and suggests correctly that men as rational beings are accountable for what they do, and are subjects of gospel address. He then adds, “Nor can it be affirmed with truth that there are no *motives* for them on which they can be exhorted to cease to do evil, or learn to do well; the motives to these things exist in all their native force, independently of the inclination or disinclination of their hearts to comply with them.”⁸¹

We are left with the question of how can sin be so interwoven and so deeply rooted in our souls as to be *natural* to us and yet allow us to have a motive to respond to the gospel *independent* of the disposition of our hearts. To add to the confusion, Fuller, who has maintained all along that the sinner can but will not turn to Christ, states in the same letter something reminiscent of his own experience as a youth:

A sinner is exhorted to repent and believe in Christ—he feels hardened in insensibility—he *cannot* repent—he has no desire after Christ. A consciousness of this kind, if it operate according to its native tendency, will lead him to reflect, What a state must I be in! Invited to repent and believe in Christ for the salvation of my soul, and cannot comply! Mine, surely, is the very heart of an infernal!⁸²

As ministers are we then to appeal to men who are totally depraved and insensible to the truth? Well, yes we are with the expectation that the power of the Gospel through the agency of the Holy Spirit will awaken the guilty sinner to the truth we preach. But man’s motives, if we can equate them with imaginations or rational powers, are only evil continually. We do not appeal to the motives, we appeal to the estranged sinner whose motives are thoroughly corrupt and wayward from God. We offer him the gospel in the hope that he will repent. We plead with him to turn to Christ with the understanding that, if he is to do that, God must transform him, that is, change his motives. But Fuller leaves us wondering what kind of motives men have that allow them to respond in faith to the gospel message and yet are incapable of doing so. Are they totally depraved or not? It is this kind of ambiguous reasoning that suggests to us that Fuller would have been better off in his struggle against the antinomianism of the hyper-Calvinists to have simply maintained the admittedly difficult paradox, but scriptural truth, that man is both guilty and responsible, that he is both obligated to turn to Christ but that he cannot do so—he is *totally* incapable of doing so unless and until God mercifully changes his heart. Such a

⁸¹Ibid., p. 305.

⁸²Ibid.

view does not inevitably shut us up to antinomianism; it confirms man's obligation to a holy God.

There are definite points of agreement with Fuller. Surely he is right in saying that man has natural abilities—to think, to reason, to choose, to act. Without these elements of the image of God in man, man would not be what he is. Whatever else he has become, he is still a man. I would agree that sin is an intrusion into the human race, and not an integral part of man's original constitution. As Machen so well put it, "universal sinfulness of mankind is not something that belongs to man just because he is man. It is by no means a necessary part of human nature as such."⁸³ Otherwise, Jesus would have had to be a sinner for the simple reason he was a man, and Adam would have had to be created a sinner, and the Christian would have no hope of one day being glorified as the culmination of his redemption from sin. No, Adam as representative man fell into sin by his own volition, and by doing so, plunged all of humanity into sin. Therefore, we can say with the Scriptures that every man has been thoroughly corrupted by it (Eph 2:3; 4:17–19; Gen 8:21; Ps 51:5; Jer 17:9). Every part of his person has been vitiated by wickedness and he is therefore incapable naturally of perceiving the revelation of God.⁸⁴ While we admit that man has natural abilities of reason, we must also realize that they are so entirely polluted by sin that they have become virtual *liabilities* as to understanding the significance of divine revelation. Do our words of proclamation fall on deaf ears? Of course, they do! Dead men cannot hear. That is what makes salvation a miracle of God's grace. He resurrects the corpse and gives him the ability to hear. The divine instrument of that ability is the quickening gospel of Jesus Christ. Therein lies the power—not in man's faculties, but in the Word.

I would agree with Fuller that Scripture makes it clear that the gospel is something to be obeyed (Rom 1:5, 6:17, 10:16), and faith therefore is a duty. But to say that man must have some ability for that duty to have relevance is to fail to understand the nature of sin. Its dominion renders man totally incapable, absolutely unable, to come to Christ. Fuller would have been better off to have simply adhered to his denomination's (Second) London Baptist Confession on the matter of

⁸³J. Gresham Machen, *The Christian View of Man* (Edinburgh: Banner of Truth, 1965), p. 208. Cf. Fuller, *Works*, p. 173.

⁸⁴It is interesting that Fuller exempts infants and imbeciles from guilt because they have no natural ability to respond to the gospel (*Works*, p. 172). But how does this absolve them from original guilt? Are they somehow exempt from Adam's sin simply because of the absence of natural powers of reason? These are questions Fuller does not answer.

total depravity:

2. Our first *Parents* by this *Sin*, fell from their original righteousness and communion with *God*, and we in them, whereby death came upon all; all becoming dead in *Sin*, and wholly defiled, in all the faculties, and parts, of soul, and body,... the guilt of the *Sin* was imputed, and *corrupted* nature conveyed, to all their posterity.... From this original *corruption*, whereby we are utterly indisposed, disabled, and made opposite to all good, and wholly inclined to all evil, do proceed all actual transgressions.⁸⁵

It is not that man cannot because he will not, it is that he will not *and* he cannot be saved;⁸⁶ yet he is still a responsible agent, accountable for the righteous demands of a holy God. Asahel Nettleton, a Calvinistic evangelist and contemporary of the Pelagianist, Charles Finney, cites the greatest theologian who ever lived as affirming both the responsibility of man to receive Christ and his total inability to do so.

There are many who think they see a great inconsistency in the preaching of ministers. "Ministers," they say, "contradict themselves—they say and unsay—they tell us to do, and then tell us we cannot do—they call upon sinners to believe and repent, and then tell them that faith and repentance are the gift of God—they call on them to come to Christ, and then tell them that they cannot come."

⁸⁵From chapter VI, Second London Confession, *Baptist Confessions of Faith*, edited by William L. Lumpkin, rev. ed. (Valley Forge, PA: Judson Press, 1969), pp. 258–59. Neither this statement, nor the one found in the Westminster Confession, from which it is taken, make any distinction between moral and natural ability/inability.

⁸⁶This is the affirmation of both Dort (1619) and Westminster 1647):

ART. III. Therefore all men are conceived in sin, and are by nature children of wrath, incapable of any saving good, prone to evil, dead in sin, and in bondage thereto; and, without the regenerating grace of the Holy Spirit, *they are neither able nor willing to return to God* [italics added], to reform the depravity of their nature, nor to dispose themselves to reformation (Third and Fourth Heads of Doctrine: *Of the Corruption of Man, his Conversion to God, and the Manner thereof*, Canons of the Synod of Dort, A.D. 1619, in vol. 3 of *Creeeds of Christendom*, p. 588).

III. Man, by his fall into a state of sin, hath wholly lost all ability of will to any spiritual good accompanying salvation; so as a natural man, being altogether averse from that good, and dead in sin, *is not able* [italics added], by his own strength, to convert himself, or to prepare himself thereunto (Chapter IX, *Of Free Will*, Westminster Confession of Faith, 1647, in vol. 3 of *Creeeds of Christendom*, p. 623).

It is difficult to imagine any expression of human communication that could be more clear in declaring the total inability of man to respond to the gospel.

That some do preach in this manner, cannot be denied. I well recollect an instance. A celebrated preacher, in one of his discourses used this language: "*Come unto me*, all ye that labour and are heavy laden, and I will give you rest." In another discourse, this same preacher said: "No man *can come unto me* except the Father which hath sent me draw him." Now, what think you, my hearers, of such preaching, and of such a preacher? What would you have said had you been present and heard Him? Would you have charged Him with contradicting himself? This preacher, you will remember, was *none other than the Lord Jesus Christ!* And, I have no doubt, that many ministers have followed His example, and been guilty of the same self-contradiction, if you call it such.⁸⁷

Adamic immediate imputation is the only solution to this problem of rendering the unregenerate guilty on the basis of total inability. "Therefore, just as through one man [Adam] sin entered into the world, and death through sin, and so death spread to all men, because all sinned" (Rom 5:12). All men are condemned and spiritually dead because of Adam's sin, which is man's sin. But the Apostle Paul does not leave men in despair: "For if by the transgression of the one, death reigned through the one, much more those who receive the abundance of grace and of the gift of righteousness will reign in life through the One, Jesus Christ" (Rom 5:17).

A SUMMARY RESOLUTION

One of the principal objections to "Gillism," or hyper-Calvinism, is its antinomianism: man is under no obligation to obey the gospel since he *cannot* do anything spiritually good. "Fullerism" or moderate Calvinism countered with duty faith: every man *is* obligated to accept Christ predicated on his ability to do so; the only reason he cannot is because he will not. Both of these views are unscriptural. The resolution to the problem is found in man's constitutional relationship to Adam. The Fall left man without ability but not accountability. "All men are corrupt throughout the *totality* of their being with every part, power, and faculty of their nature—mind, intellect, emotions, will, conscience, body—being affected by the Fall."⁸⁸ Such depravity leaves man altogether unable to come to Christ. In answer to the objection,

⁸⁷David B. Calhoun, *Faith and Learning*, in *Princeton Seminary*, 2 vols. (Edinburgh: Banner of Truth, 1994), 1:225–26. In addition to Nettleton's citation, the Scripture is replete with "cannot" passages (e.g., Matt 7:18; John 3:3, 5; 14:17; 15:4–5; Rom 8:7–8; 1 Cor 2:14).

⁸⁸Robert Reymond, *A New Systematic Theology of the Christian Faith* (Nashville: Nelson, 1998), p. 452.

“How [then] can the teaching of total depravity and total inability be reconciled with God’s commands? Do not the very commands of God presuppose the human ability to do them? Can a man justly be required to do that for which he has not the necessary ability?” Robert Reymond responds, “God deals with man according to his *obligation*, not according to the measure of his ability. Before the Fall, man had both the obligation and the ability to obey God. As a result of the Fall, he retained the former but lost the latter.”⁸⁹ What is the natural man left to do? He can only cast himself on the mercies of God, realizing that there is absolutely nothing he can do to save himself, but that divine grace is fully adequate to pardon the repentant sinner on the basis of an all-sufficient atonement.

If it is incumbent upon all men to repent and turn to Christ for salvation, it is likewise the duty of every Christian to take the gospel of God’s salvation to them. The warrant of the gospel is not to be found in some sign in the unregenerate that he is elect; it is to be found in the promise that “whoever will call on the name of the Lord will be saved” (Rom 10:13). But “how will they hear without a preacher?” (Rom 10:14). It is God’s own mandate that we, as believers, “make disciples of all the nations” (Matt 28:19–20), that God might draw to himself such as should be saved (Acts 2:47). The revival of this divine commission was the practical beginning of the Modern Missions movement, inspired by the burden of men like Andrew Fuller and his companion in the faith, William Carey. Carey shared his friend’s vision of reaching *all* men with the gospel of Christ. He persisted (“plodded,” as he called it) in summoning his fellows’ attention to what God had commanded as a *faith duty*: “Go into *all* the world and preach the gospel to *all* creation” (Mark 16:15, italics added).⁹⁰

Since the apostolic age many...attempts to spread the gospel have been made, which have been considerably successful, notwithstanding which a very considerable part of mankind is still involved in all the darkness of heathenism. Some attempts are still being made, but they are inconsiderable in comparison with what might be done if the whole body of Christians entered heartily into the spirit of the divine command on this subject.... Pity,...humanity, and much more Christianity, call loudly for every possible exertion to introduce the gospel amongst them [the heathen].... Let then everyone in his station consider himself as bound to act with all his might and in every possible way for God.... what a “treasure,” what a “harvest” must wait such characters as Paul, and Elliott, and

⁸⁹Ibid., p. 454.

⁹⁰This verse is not found in the best manuscripts, but its truth is undeniable (cf. Matt 28:19–20; Luke 24:46–49; Acts 1:8).

Brainerd, and others, who have given themselves wholly to the work of the Lord.... Surely it is worth while to lay ourselves out with all our might in promoting the cause and kingdom of Christ.⁹¹

⁹¹William Carey, *An Enquiry into the Obligations of Christians, to Use Means for the Conversion of the Heathens...* (Leicester, England: Ann Ireland, 1792), pp. 4, 8, 55, 57.