

~ OF MEN AND MINISTERS ~
ANDREW FULLER'S PASTORAL THEOLOGY
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In preparing for the pulpit, it would be well to reflect in some such manner as this: – I am expected to preach, it may be to some hundreds of people, some of whom may have come several miles to hear; and what have I to say to them? Is it for me to sit here studying a text merely to find something to say to fill up the hour? I may do this without imparting any useful instruction, without commending myself to any man's conscience, and without winning, or even aiming to win, one soul to Christ. It is possible there may be in the audience a poor miserable creature, labouring under the load of a guilty conscience. If he depart without being told how to obtain rest for his soul, what may be the consequence? Or, it may be, some stranger may be there who has never heard the way of salvation in his life. If he should depart without hearing it now, and should die before another opportunity occurs, how shall I meet him at the bar of God? Possibly some one of my constant hearers may die in the following week; and is there nothing I should wish to say to him before his departure? It may be that I myself may die before another Lord's day: this may be the last time that I shall ascend the pulpit; and have I no important testimony to leave with the people of my care?¹

I imagine – I even hope – that words like these make us wonder why you or I or anyone else would ever step into a pulpit, even as they prompt that sense of holy obligation which characterised the apostle Paul: “for necessity is laid upon me; yes, woe is me if I do not preach the gospel” (1Cor 9.16). This call to sober preparation communicates some sense of the weight felt by its author, Andrew Fuller, concerning the work of the ministry.

In his recent monograph on Fuller's pastoral theology,² Keith Grant considers the pastoral and congregational implications of theological systems (theology from the perspective of the shepherd); the expression of ecclesiology and church order, notably the relations of the minister, the church and her other officers; and, theological reflections on the office and functions of a pastor.³ It is the last of these which corresponds most closely to my particular concern – Fuller's personal sense of what is involved in being a pastor and preacher, and his counsels to others engaged in the work. In assessing this, and to provide a measure of control, I will look almost entirely to sermons⁴ addressed to pastors and churches (usually ordination sermons), missionaries and the receiving or sending churches, to a short series of “Letters to a Young Minister,” and to some incidental correspondence and anecdotes.⁵

Mentors and influences

1 Andrew Fuller, ed. Andrew Gunton Fuller, *Complete Works* (Harrisonburg, VA: Sprinkle Publications, 1988), 1:715-6.

2 Keith Grant, *Andrew Fuller and the Evangelical Renewal of Pastoral Theology* (Milton Keynes: Paternoster, 2013).

3 Grant, *Andrew Fuller and the Evangelical Renewal of Pastoral Theology*, 7-8.

4 There are thirty-one in total which fall into this particular category.

5 Naturally, Fuller had much to say in these sermons about the relationship of the church to Christ, to the gospel and to Christ's undershepherds, but that falls outside the immediate scope of this address.

We should recognise some of those who helped and influenced Fuller in his development as man and minister. Among these, high on the list would be Robert Hall, Sr., minister of Arnsby. Hall preached when Fuller was recognised as minister both in Soham and in Kettering. It was Hall who recommended another man with a significant influence, Jonathan Edwards, whose writings helped Fuller enormously as he wrestled with the nature of sin and the offer of the gospel to the needy. Peers who kept pace with Fuller included such men as John Sutcliff, John Ryland Jr., Samuel Pearce, and William Carey.

Keith Grant identifies another important source: an annotated translation by Robert Robinson of Jean Claude's *Essay on the Composition of a Sermon*. One of Fuller's biographers says that "one of the first books that Mr. Fuller read, after entering on the ministry, and which he frequently recommended to others, was CLAUDE'S ESSAY on the composition of a Sermon; and to that work he acknowledged himself indebted, for any just ideas which he entertained upon the subject."⁶ This weighty work (in which the notes outweigh the text by a considerable margin) clearly had a significant influence on Fuller as a preacher.

Fundamentally, however, Fuller was – in the best sense of the word – a Biblicist. "Learn your religion from the Bible," he exhorted others: "Let that be your decisive rule."⁷ He went to Scripture for his message and his models, for his modes and methods, for his manner and his matter. He urged those to whom he was a mentor and a model to do likewise: "Do not be content with superficial views of the gospel. Read and think for yourself on every subject. Read the Bible, not merely for texts, but for Scriptural knowledge. Truth attained in this way is like property – it will wear the better for having been acquired by dint of industry."⁸ We will consider his counsels primarily as they relate to the man who preaches and to his pulpit labours.

Character and calling

Fuller laid great emphasis where relatively little is laid today – the character of the man of God. We are perhaps more concerned to develop a practical toolbox for the gospel minister. Fuller, in keeping with the best tradition of pastoral theology, spoke first to the spiritual calibre of the man who was God's appointed instrument for bringing his word to bear on the hearts of other men.

Individual spiritual vitality

Fuller repeatedly and rigorously enforced the maxim that the life of a minister is the life of his ministry: "Personal religion," he declared, "is of the utmost importance to a minister."⁹ Again and again he calls men back to the matter of their own standing with God

6 J. W. Morris, *Memoirs of the Life and Writings of the Rev. Andrew Fuller* (Lincoln & Edmands: Boston, 1830, repr. Forgotten Books, 2012), 69.

7 Fuller, *Works*, 1:483.

8 Fuller, *Works*, 1:496.

9 Fuller, *Works*, 1:488.

and the health of their own souls, the ardour of their love for God and the vigour of their walk with God:

I think it may be laid down as a rule, which both Scripture and experience will confirm, that eminent spirituality in a minister is usually attended with eminent usefulness. I do not mean to say our usefulness depends upon our spirituality, as an effect depends upon its cause; nor yet that it is always in proportion to it. God is a Sovereign; and frequently sees proper to convince us of it, in variously bestowing his blessing on the means of grace. But yet he is not wanting in giving encouragement to what he approves, wherever it is found. Our want of usefulness is often to be ascribed to our want of spirituality, much oftener than to our want of talents. God has frequently been known to succeed men of inferior abilities, when they have been eminent for holiness, while he has blasted others of much superior talents, when that quality has been wanting. Hundreds of ministers, who, on account of their gifts, have promised to be shining characters, have proved the reverse; and all owing to such things as pride, unwatchfulness, carnality, and levity.¹⁰

Not only is the gospel minister's own healthy spirituality vital for the effectiveness of his ministry, but it is – often by virtue of the very pressures and circumstances of that ministry – the element of his life that is most consistently assaulted and most easily neglected:

Persecutions – temptations – and false doctrines, sanctioned by fashion and the appearance of learning, have occasionally made sad havoc with the truth, and forced many a one who held it loosely, many a one who received his faith at second-hand, instead of drawing directly from the fountain, and who therefore never fully comprehended it, to give it up.¹¹

We should never simply assume that a gospel minister is a spiritually healthy man:

I believe it is very common for the personal religion of a minister to be taken for granted; and this may prove a temptation to him to take it for granted too. Ministers, being wholly devoted to the service of God, are supposed to have considerable advantages for spiritual improvement. These they certainly have; and if their minds be spiritual, they may be expected to make greater proficiency in the Divine life than their brethren. But it should be remembered, that if they are not spiritual, those things which would otherwise be a help would prove a hinderance [*sic*]. If we study Divine subjects merely as ministers, they will produce no salutary effect. We may converse with the most impressive truths, as soldiers and surgeons do with blood, till they cease to make any impression upon us. We must meditate on these things as Christians, first feeding our own souls upon them, and then imparting that which we have believed and felt to others; or, whatever good we may do to them, we shall receive none ourselves. Unless we mix faith with what we preach, as well as with what we hear, the word will not profit us.¹²

To sustain spiritual vitality, a minister must remember that he is a Christian man before he is a Christian minister, and so study the Scriptures as a Christian and not merely as a preacher. “One of the greatest temptations of a ministerial life is to handle Divine truth as ministers, rather than as Christians – for others, rather than for ourselves.”¹³ The preacher must not become a man who goes to the Bible simply for something to say. There is no space in Fuller's pastoral theology for a ministerial professionalism that approaches the truth in an abstract and academic fashion: “The studying of Divine truth as preachers rather than as Christians, or, in other words, studying it for the sake of finding out something to say to others, without so much as thinking of profiting our own souls, is a temptation to which we

10 Fuller, *Works*, 1:143.

11 Fuller, *Works*, 1:548.

12 Fuller, *Works*, 1:501.

13 Fuller, *Works*, 1:482.

are more than ordinarily exposed.”¹⁴ Fuller therefore charged a congregation calling a minister in this way:

The things which he urges upon you *are equally binding upon himself*. When he exhibits to you the only name given under heaven, among men, by which you can be saved, and charges you, on pain of eternal damnation, not to neglect it, remember his own soul also is at stake. And, when he exhorts and warns you, if he himself should privately pursue a contrary course, he seals his own destruction.¹⁵

Absolute ministerial integrity

Closely related to this and flowing out of it is the demand for absolute ministerial integrity and fidelity: “Faithfulness is absolutely required of a servant of Christ. You are not required to be *successful*: your Lord and Master was not very successful; but he was faithful, and so must you be.”¹⁶ The pastor-preacher must know and pursue his duty without deviation and distraction, his faith and his life properly joined, for a man filled with the Spirit will know how to behave in every department which he is called to occupy.¹⁷ Fuller calls attention to Paul’s language in 1 Thessalonians 2, which

exhibits him and his brethren as bold in proclaiming the gospel; sincere in their doctrine; acting as in the sight of God; faithful to their trust, and to the souls of their hearers; unostentatious; gentle and affectionate; disinterested; and consistent in their deportment, not only among unbelievers, where even hypocrites will preserve appearances, but also among the people of their charge.¹⁸

This, for Fuller, was the very model of a Christian man and minister. He has not signed up for a life of comfort and applause – “Expectations of ease and honour are utterly unworthy of a Christian missionary.”¹⁹ Embracing his calling, a comprehensive and consistent godliness must characterise him in every sphere. For example, his investment in and character before his family must be above reproach, for “if you walk not closely with God there, you will be ill able to work for him elsewhere.”²⁰

From this position of sincerity and fidelity, the gospel minister is to prosecute his holy business without fear or favour, speaking the truth to all without prevarication or compromise: “Study not to offend any man; yet keep not back important truth, even if it do offend. You must not enter the pulpit to indulge your own temper; but neither are you at liberty to indulge the humour of others. Be more concerned to commend yourself to the

14 Fuller, *Works*, 1:142.

15 Fuller, *Works*, 1:198.

16 Fuller, *Works*, 1:498.

17 Fuller, *Works*, 1:141.

18 Fuller, *Works*, 1:542.

19 Fuller, *Works*, 1:514.

20 Fuller, *Works*, 1:136.

consciences of your people than to their good opinion.”²¹ So, with regard to the unconverted, the preacher must hold back nothing that is needful:

However it may pain you, or offend your hearers, if you would preach the gospel as you ought to preach it – *you must be faithful*. . . . If you would preach the gospel as you ought to preach it, the approbation of *God* must be your main object. . . . He that is afraid or ashamed to preach the whole of the gospel, in all its implications and bearings, let him stand aside; he is utterly unworthy of being a soldier of Jesus Christ.²²

When it comes to matters of righteousness, “Insist on every Divine truth and duty. Where interest or friendship stand in the way, it may be trying; but if you yield, the very parties to whom you yield will despise you. Speak but the truth in love, and speak the whole truth, and you will commend yourself to every man’s conscience, when you can do no more.”²³

Fuller insists on the pastor exercising his right to reprove and rebuke when circumstances demand it, tempered by awareness of the propriety of private rebuke when possible and compassion for the humanity of the responsible man. Thus, on the one hand, he urges, “‘Rebuke with all authority;’ but let your personal rebukes be private. To introduce them in the pulpit is unmanly, and would render you despicable.”²⁴ On the other, he acknowledges that

Ministers, as well as other men, have their feelings. They love peace, and they wish to retain the friendship of their people. But if a minister tell the truth, there is great danger of his being counted an enemy, and treated as such. Faithful reproof, therefore, must be self-denying work. The grand secret, I think, to render this part of our work as easy as possible, is to love the souls of the people, and to do every thing from pure good-will, and with a view to their advantage – “speaking the truth in love.” The man that can be offended by such treatment, and leave his place in the house of God, can be no loss to a minister or to a congregation.²⁵

The man of God is to shun favouritism, for “the great art of presiding in a church, so as to promote its welfare, is to be neutral between the members, always on the side of God and righteousness, and to let them see that, whatever your opinion may be, you really love them.”²⁶ Likewise, he is to recognise that there are some hills worth dying on, and others that can be surrendered without shame: “If we ‘look on the things of others,’ we may, in non-essentials, after speaking our minds, yield and be happy. But if we are determined to carry every point which appears to us desirable, in spite of the opinion of our brethren, though we may not always succeed, we shall invariably be despised for the attempt.”²⁷

All these duties are carried out with the felt weight of eternity pressing down: “My brother, be faithful, and you shall receive a crown. If you be not, the eternal curse of God

21 Fuller, *Works*, 1:485-6.

22 Fuller, *Works*, 1:495.

23 Fuller, *Works*, 1:490.

24 Fuller, *Works*, 1:490.

25 Fuller, *Works*, 1:492-3.

26 Fuller, *Works*, 1:481.

27 Fuller, *Works*, 1:490.

awaits you!”²⁸ Or again, commenting on the “faithful servant” of Matthew 25.21: “You are intrusted with a portion of his property, of the use or abuse of which, another day, you will have to render an account.”²⁹ Ministers should be men with their eye on the reward: “In proportion to the degree of fidelity with which we have discharged the trust committed to us in this world will be the honour and happiness conferred upon us in the next.”³⁰ Gripped in this way by enduring realities, Fuller’s martial charge rings out with urgency and pungency:

“Make full proof of thy ministry.” The word means thoroughly to accomplish that which you have undertaken. Such is the import of Col. iv. 17, “Say to Archippus, Take heed to the ministry which thou hast received in the Lord, that thou fulfil it.” Were you to present a soldier with a sword, and bid him make full proof of it, he could not misunderstand you.³¹

Perhaps at this point we think that while such a man might obtain a measure of credibility, he is unlikely to be influenced by affection. That would be to miss a thread that he already become evident and so entirely to misunderstand the matter.

Deep pastoral responsibility

According to Fuller, “an affectionate concern after [the people’s] salvation” is “one of the most important qualifications for the ministry. True, it is not the only one. . . . But this qualification is that without which the greatest gifts, natural and acquired, are nothing as to real usefulness.”³² Indeed, with regard to all a man’s labours, “If love be wanting, preaching will be in vain.”³³ Fuller’s son, Andrew Gunton Fuller, offered this perspective on the playing out of such convictions:

Thus he prosecuted his pastoral and ministerial work, most grateful and joyous when he had experienced “a good time” in preaching or in prayer, and most deeply dejected when he had felt no “tenderness of heart” in conducting the public services. He was a constant visitor, especially at the houses of the poorer members of his church, and acknowledged that he gained much good from the practice. The griefs and sorrows of his people became his own, and he entered into their joys with all his heart. Knowing that the success of his work depended in no small measure upon his own spirituality, he hungered and thirsted after righteousness. Every hour of the day the care of the church was upon him. He thought but little of popularity, but earnestly desired to accomplish great things for the glory of God.³⁴

In all this, Christ Jesus himself is the great director and the true model. The very qualification that the Christ requires for an undershepherd is love: “[Christ] would not trust [his people] with one who did not love him. . . . But if we love Christ, we shall love his

28 Fuller, *Works*, 1:496.

29 Fuller, *Works*, 1:497.

30 Fuller, *Works*, 1:500.

31 Fuller, *Works*, 1:519-20.

32 Fuller, *Works*, 1:508.

33 Fuller, *Works*, 1:544.

34 Andrew Gunton Fuller, *Men Worth Remembering: Andrew Fuller* (London: Hodder and Stoughton, 1882), 57-58.

people for his sake.”³⁵ A selfless communication of gospel truth flows through the life of such a man.

So it is love that governs the sphere and tone of counsel and, where necessary, rebuke. Fuller underlined that much good could be done in private that would not be appropriately carried out in public: “it is in our private visits that we can be free with our people, and they with us.”³⁶ He assured pastors that

visiting is an essential part of your work, that you may become acquainted with the circumstances, the spiritual necessities of your people. They will be able to impart their feelings freely and unreservedly; and you will be able to administer the appropriate counsel to much better purpose than you possibly can from the pulpit, and with greater particularity than would be becoming in a public address. Only let us burn while we shine. Let a savour of Christ accompany all our instructions. A minister who maintains an upright, affectionate conduct, may say almost any thing, in a way of just reproof, without giving offence.³⁷

Indeed, “the great secret [of close pastoral dealing] is to mingle love with your fidelity.”³⁸ Once more, Fuller contemplates his calling with an eschatological edge. Reflecting on the life and death of his dear friend, John Sutcliff, he commented: “The separation of a pastor and a people is a serious event. He is gone to give account of his ministry, and his account will include many things pertaining to the people of his charge.”³⁹ The faithful pastor lives, serves and dies with his people on his heart.

Developed personal ability

Such holy duties cannot be pursued and discharged lightly or carelessly: “A spiritual, diligent minister is commonly a fruitful one, and a blessing to his people.”⁴⁰ The man of God must prepare himself for his work, recognising its demands:

Of this preparation we have to speak; and it consists in prayer, and self-examination, and meditation. Your work is a *course*, and for this you must prepare by “girding up the loins of your mind” – a *fight*, and you must “put on the whole armour of God.” The work of God should not be entered upon rashly. God frequently brings his servants through a train of instructions and trials, that they may be fitted for it.⁴¹

Fuller insists on a faithful handling of the text, of understanding each portion of God’s truth in its proper context, and of interpreting, explaining and applying it accordingly.

The great thing necessary for expounding the Scriptures is *to enter into their true meaning*. We may read them, and talk about them, again and again, without imparting any light concerning them. If the hearer, when you have done, understand no more of that part of Scripture than he did before, your labour is lost. Yet this is commonly the case with those attempts at expounding which consist of little else than comparing parallel passages, or, by the help of a Concordance, tracing the use of the same word in other

35 Fuller, *Works*, 1:477-8.

36 Fuller, *Works*, 1:141.

37 Fuller, *Works*, 1:481.

38 Fuller, *Works*, 1:487.

39 Fuller, *Works*, 1:349.

40 Fuller, *Works*, 1:508.

41 Fuller, *Works*, 1:484.

places, going from text to text till both the preacher and the people are wearied and lost. This is troubling the Scriptures rather than expounding them. If I were to open a chest of oranges among my friends, and, in order to ascertain their quality, were to hold up one, and lay it down; then hold up another, and say, This is like the last; then a third, a fourth, a fifth, and so on, till I came to the bottom of the chest, saying of each. It is like the other; of what account would it be? The company would doubtless be weary, and had much rather have tasted two or three of them.⁴²

Such faithful handling requires both spiritual illumination and intellectual perspiration. On the one hand, Fuller can avow that “Every Christian knows by experience that, in a spiritual frame of mind, he can understand more of the Scriptures in an hour than he can at other times, with the utmost application, in a week. It is by an unction from the Holy One that we know all things.”⁴³ On the other, commenting on 1 Timothy 4.15-16, he assures us that “it is a shameful abuse of the doctrine of Divine influence to allege it as a reason for neglecting diligent study for the pulpit.”⁴⁴ The gospel minister must sweat over his spiritual acquisitions:

Truth is a well – full of water, but deep. A mine – rich, but requiring much labour to dig up the precious ore. Such a depth is there in the word of God, that inspiration itself does not supersede the necessity of close application, Psal. xxvii. 4. We must be perpetually *inquiring* and *searching*, 1 Pet. i. 10-12. We must, “give ourselves” to the word of God and prayer. The very angels are perpetually gospel students, “desiring to look into” the things that are revealed. Unless we labour in this way, there can be no proper food or variety in our preaching. “Meditate on these things: give thyself wholly to them.” The truths of God’s word are worthy of being our meat and drink. . . . Digging in these mines is very pleasant work when we can enter into them. But there are seasons when it is otherwise; and yet we must go on, though we scarcely know how; this is labour.⁴⁵

Fuller insists on an arduous personal acquisition of the truth that a man is to proclaim: “Do not be content with general truth. – Study the Scriptures minutely, and for yourself, and pray over your study. This will make it your own; and it will be doubly interesting to yourself and your people, than if you adopt it at second hand. – Read and think, not merely as a minister, but as a Christian.”⁴⁶ Again, this is where genuine spiritual vitality is indispensable, knowing and delighting in the truth for oneself in order to be an effective herald of that truth:

Study the *gospel* – what it implies, what it includes, and what consequences it involves. I have heard complaints of some of our young ministers, that though they are not heterodox, yet they are not evangelical; that though they do not propagate error, yet the grand, essential, distinguishing truths of the gospel do not form the prevailing theme of their discourses.⁴⁷

Beyond such a profound and detailed knowledge of the truth, “it belongs to the work of the ministry to apply truth to the circumstances and consciences of the hearers, as well as to teach it; and, in order to this, we must study men as well as things.” For these twin tasks of teaching and applying, says Fuller, we need to labour in the fields of observation and

42 Fuller, *Works*, 1:712-13.

43 Fuller, *Works*, 1:713.

44 Fuller, *Works*, 1:506.

45 Fuller, *Works*, 1:492.

46 Fuller, *Works*, 1:507.

47 Fuller, *Works*, 1:509.

experience.⁴⁸ No wonder Fuller calls on his brothers to devote themselves to their work, and warns them of the consequences of neglect:

To make full proof of your ministry, you must give yourselves continually to prayer, and the ministry of the word. “Meditate on these things, and give yourselves wholly to them;” and this to the end of your lives. Let no one imagine that he will leave his present situation fully qualified for the work. If, by prayer and a diligent application to study, you acquire such a habit of close thinking as that on entering the work it shall be your delight to prosecute it, this is all that will be expected of you. It is for the want of this habit of study that there are so many saunterers, and have been so many scandals amongst ministers.⁴⁹

Form and structure

Fuller was persuaded that preaching is “the leading duty of a minister.”⁵⁰ As we have seen, it is a work not to be undertaken lightly. Perhaps taking a cue from men like Matthew Henry and other Puritans, Fuller made a distinction between “expounding the Scriptures” and “discoursing on Divine subjects”⁵¹ – preaching sermons. Of the former, Fuller spoke of the value to preacher and people of regular exposition (in eighteen years, he said, he had “gone over the greater part of the Old Testament and some books in the New,”⁵² a statement noteworthy both in the extent and the balance of the claim). Again, Fuller hammered home the need to understand the text in its context, to drink into the spirit of the writers by a proper reliance on the same Spirit upon whom they relied. “It is impossible,” he asserted, “to enter into the sentiments of any great writer without a kindred mind.” He never ceased to enforce the necessity of entering into that truth for oneself:

You are aware that there are two main objects to be attained in the work of the Christian ministry – enlightening the minds and affecting the hearts of the people. These are the usual means by which the work of God is accomplished. Allow me to remind you that, in order to the attainment of these objects, you yourself must be under their influence. If you would enlighten others, you must be “a shining light” yourself. And if you would affect others, you yourself must feel; your own heart must “burn” with holy ardour. You must be “a burning and a shining light.”⁵³

However, Fuller considered sermons to be in a separate class from expositions.⁵⁴ It was not, of course, that they should be any less faithful to the text. Rather, sermons addressed particular subjects “in doctrinal and practical religion, which require to be illustrated, established, and improved; which cannot be done in an exposition.”⁵⁵ We might think that Fuller goes a little far in his absolutism at this point, but I wonder if it would do us some good to ask whether or not the insistence on sequential exposition as the be-all-and-end-all of

48 Fuller, *Works*, 1:492.

49 Fuller, *Works*, 1:520.

50 Fuller, *Works*, 1:544.

51 Fuller, *Works*, 1:712.

52 Fuller, *Works*, 1:712.

53 Fuller, *Works*, 1:479.

54 See his discussion, and 1:544.

55 Fuller, *Works*, 1:714.

preaching might itself risk an unhealthy absolutism. For sermons in particular, Fuller insisted that there be an internal unity of design, a sublimation of the preacher's capacities to the issuing of a single spiritual thrust to the heart of men.

Plain style

The preacher should use the language of the Scripture in its proper place and with its proper force, not drawing its teeth.⁵⁶ “The doctrines of the Scriptures, Scripturally stated, are calculated to interest the heart, and to produce genuine evangelical obedience.”⁵⁷ In such teaching, the preacher should “avoid vulgar expressions: do not affect finical⁵⁸ ones, nor words out of common use.”⁵⁹ Fuller eschewed all rhetorical frippery and adornment, seeking to strike a balance between crassness and extravagance, calling for a sort of earthy directness:

In general, I do not think a minister of Jesus Christ should aim at fine composition for the pulpit. We ought to use sound speech, and good sense; but if we aspire after great elegance of expression, or become very exact in the formation of our periods, though we may amuse and please the ears of a few, we shall not profit the many, and consequently shall not answer the great end of our ministry. Illiterate hearers may be very poor judges of preaching; yet the effect which it produces upon them is the best criterion of its real excellence.⁶⁰

Cultivated clarity

Then there must be a thoughtful ordering and structuring of material to achieve the stated aim. Fuller comments dismissively, even contemptuously, that “I say nothing of those preachers who profess to go into the pulpit without an errand, and to depend upon the Holy Spirit to furnish them with one at the time. I write not for them, but for such as make a point of thinking before they attempt to preach.”⁶¹ Men ought to prepare and preach with a laser focus: “In every sermon we should have an errand; and one of such importance that if it be received or complied with it will issue in eternal salvation.”⁶² He offers some practical counsel: “It might be of use, if, in the composition of sermons, we were to oblige ourselves to give titles to them. Many of what are called sermons would be found to require three or four titles to answer to their contents; which at once proves that, properly speaking, they are not sermons.”⁶³ Once a man both feels and understands his material,

56 Fuller, *Works*, 1:104.

57 Fuller, *Works*, 1:509.

58 Fussy, elaborate, requiring great attention to detail.

59 Fuller, *Works*, 1:724.

60 Fuller, *Works*, 1:717.

61 Fuller, *Works*, 1:715.

62 Fuller, *Works*, 1:715.

63 Fuller, *Works*, 1:720.

much depends, as to your being heard with pleasure and profit, on a proper discussion and management of the subject. At all events avoid a multiplying of heads and particulars. A few well-chosen thoughts, matured, proved, and improved, are abundantly more acceptable than when the whole is chopped, as it were, into mince-meat.⁶⁴

Fuller resists the temptation to offer absolute rules for what cannot be ruled absolutely, or to call for elaboration where simplicity carries its own commendation:

But in all cases the division must be governed by the materials you have to divide. It would be absurd to explain a subject that was already as plain as you could make it, or in which there appeared no difficulties or liability to misunderstand. There are three questions I have often put to myself in thinking on a subject – *What? Why? What then?* In other words – What am I going to teach? Why? or on what ground do I advance it as a truth? And what does it concern any or all of my hearers if it be true?⁶⁵

Spiritual insight

If the preacher is to accomplish this he needs to know the soul of man and the truth of God, and to be able to handle the latter appropriately when dealing with the former:

It is not more necessary for a surgeon or a physician to understand the anatomy of the human body, than it is for ministers to understand what may be called the anatomy of the soul. . . . We need therefore to know the root of the disease, and the various ways in which it operates. In order to effect a cure, the knowledge of the disease is indispensable; and in order to attain to this knowledge, we must study the various symptoms by which the disorder may be distinguished. . . . Without [a knowledge of sanctified human nature], we shall be unable to trace the work of God in the soul; and unable to fan the gentle flame of Divine love in the genuine Christian, and to detect and expose the various counterfeits.⁶⁶

In cultivating that unity of design which gives a sermon its driving point, Fuller encourages the preacher to interrogate a text, to determine the force of words and their relations to each other.⁶⁷ This variety adorns and serves a unity of design.

Felt truth

Fuller was more of the solemn orator than the pulpit poet, but it is clear that he was an intense and passionate preacher. He warned against a flippant, casual, or unengaging approach: “You may preach even the gospel dryly. It must be preached faithfully, firmly, earnestly, affectionately. The apostle *so* spoke that many believed. Manner is a means of conveying truth. A cold manner disgraces important truth.”⁶⁸ At the same time, he warned against “an *assumed earnestness*, or *forced zeal*, in the pulpit, which many weak hearers may mistake for the enjoyment of God” – such, he said, would be evident to the hearers and is simply disgusting.⁶⁹

64 Fuller, *Works*, 1:724.

65 Fuller, *Works*, 1:725.

66 Fuller, *Works*, 1:480.

67 Fuller, *Works*, 1:718-719.

68 Fuller, *Works*, 1:510.

69 Fuller, *Works*, 1:137.

Such a compelling manner would be secured when a man was under the influence of the truth he proclaimed: “Cut off the reproach of *dry* doctrine, by preaching it feelingly.”⁷⁰ There is an undeniable connection between the spiritual intensity of the preacher and the spiritual impact of his words on the congregation: “We must preach from the heart, or we shall seldom, if ever, produce any good in the hearts of our hearers.”⁷¹ Again, we must own the truth we proclaim: “How can we discourse on subjects which we do not believe? If we have not tasted the grace of God, we shall feel no pleasure in proclaiming it to others.”⁷² Preachers must be men with “decided principles of their own,” not preaching borrowed truth, for nothing of value is drawn from a void.⁷³ Once more, there must be this genuine emotion intimately and appropriately connected with the truth being handled.

Affected zeal will not do. A gilded fire may shine, but it will not warm. We may smite with the hand, and stamp with the foot, and throw ourselves into violent agitations; but if we feel not, it is not likely the people will – unless, indeed, it be a feeling of disgust. But suppose there be no affectation, nor any deficiency of good and sound doctrine; yet if in our work we feel no inward satisfaction, we shall resemble a mill-stone – preparing food for others, the value of which we are unable to appreciate ourselves. Indeed, without feeling, we shall be incapable of preaching any truth or of inculcating any duty aright.⁷⁴

Such genuine zeal will be properly cultivated as the minister enters into – we might almost say, realizes or actualizes – the nature of the transaction in which he is engaged.

How would you feel in throwing out a rope to a drowning man, or in lighting a fire in a wilderness to attract the attention of one who was dear to you, and who was lost? How did Aaron feel during the plague, when he stood between the dead and the living? O my brother, enter into these feelings. Realize them. Let them inspire you with holy, affectionate zeal. Souls are perishing around you; and though you cannot “make an atonement for the people’s sins,” yet you can publish one, made by our great High Priest; and, receiving and exhibiting this atonement, you may hope to save yourself and them that hear you.⁷⁵

Exalted Christ

As we would expect, Fuller warned against that preaching of self that consists in preaching for worldly advantage, for ease and laziness, for applause, for the gathering of a faction.⁷⁶ A man could even seem to be doing something good, but – if wrongly motivated – would still only be preaching his own name. Fuller therefore urged men to steer clear of curious speculations and private impulses and impressions, and make Christ “the leading theme” of their ministry:⁷⁷

70 Fuller, *Works*, 1:544.

71 Fuller, *Works*, 1:546.

72 Fuller, *Works*, 1:517.

73 Fuller, *Works*, 1:141.

74 Fuller, *Works*, 1:480.

75 Fuller, *Works*, 1:510.

76 Fuller, *Works*, 1:502.

77 Fuller, *Works*, 1:516.

Preach Christ, or you had better be any thing than a preacher. The necessity laid on Paul was not barely to preach, but to preach Christ. "Woe unto me if I preach not the gospel!" . . . If you preach Christ, you need not fear for want of matter. His person and work are rich in fulness. Every Divine attribute is seen in him. All the types prefigure him. The prophecies point to him. Every truth bears relation to him. The law itself must be so explained and enforced as to lead to him.⁷⁸

Fuller went on to exhort that his divinity and glorious character be exhibited, his mediation and atonement held up as the sinner's only hope, to press upon even the chief of sinners the blessings that come in embracing Christ, to preach him as the Lord and Lawgiver to his church:

The preaching of Christ will answer every end of preaching. This is the doctrine which God owns to conversion, to the leading of awakened sinners to peace, and to the comfort of true Christians. If the doctrine of the cross be no comfort to us, it is a sign we have no right to comfort. This doctrine is calculated to quicken the indolent, to draw forth every Christian grace, and to recover the backslider. This is the universal remedy for all the moral diseases of all mankind.⁷⁹

Fuller saw Christ as the core of all Christian faith and life, the golden hub at the centre of the wheel. It is through Christ that we enter the way and by Christ that we continue in the way. As a result, the whole spectrum of Christian instruction must be preached in its relation to Christ:

Every sermon, more or less, should have some relation to Christ, and bear on his person or work. This is the life of all doctrine, and it will be our own fault if it is dry. Do not consider it as one subject among others, but as that which involves all others, and gives them an interest they could not otherwise possess. Preach not only the truth, but all truth, "as it is in Jesus." However ingenious our sermons may be, unless they bear on Christ, and lead the mind to Christ, we do not preach the faith of the gospel.⁸⁰

What we need, therefore, is a close adherence to Christ in our ministerial labours, a tight orbit that keeps us around the spiritual centre of gravity:

It must be our concern, as ministers, to know him; and, comparatively speaking, "to know nothing else" . . . and this that we may diffuse the knowledge of him to others. The glory of Christ's character is such that if he were but viewed in a true light, and not through the false mediums of prejudice and the love of sin, but through the mirror of the gospel, he must be loved.⁸¹

Why should this be so? Why such an adherence? "When Christ dwells in the heart, see what follows! This is the unction by which we know all things. And this is the doctrine which God blesses to the building of his church."⁸²

Loving heart

We have noted Fuller's affectionate concern for the flock of Christ. It is this which constrains the preacher: it governs the aim of his preaching, the plainness of his speech, the clarity he cultivates, the deliberations of his study, the earnestness with which he speaks and the burden under which he labours, the declaration of Christ above all things. All this gushes

78 Fuller, *Works*, 1:503.

79 Fuller, *Works*, 1:504.

80 Fuller, *Works*, 1:516.

81 Fuller, *Works*, 1:479.

82 Fuller, *Works*, 1:505.

from the pastor, carried along on a current of ardent love: “Cultivate the affectionate. Not indeed an affectation of feeling, but genuine feeling. Christ wept over sinners, and so must we. If we trifle with men, or be careless about their salvation, or deal forth damnation with an unfeeling heart, we do not preach ‘as we ought.’”⁸³ This Christlike heart of love tempers and governs all the man of God’s dealings with the saints, publicly and privately:

Still your faithfulness must be tempered with love. There is such a thing as unfeeling fidelity—and preaching *at* people, rather than *to* them. Our Lord himself, who is a perfect pattern of faithfulness, and was particularly severe against the hypocritical Pharisees, yet wept over sinners, even while denouncing judgments against them. “Speak the truth in love.”⁸⁴

With such governing principles as these, Fuller turns us away from the professionalism of the modern pastorate and the performances of the modern pulpit. He demands that we cultivate grace first and then gifts, neglecting neither but holding fast to both in their proper relation. To be a fruitful minister of God the pastor must first be a faithful man of God. To reverse this priority is to invite disaster. To embrace it is to enter an excellent way in pursuit of a glorious end:

Place yourself in idea, my brother, before your Lord and Master, at the last day, and anticipate the joy of receiving his approbation. This is heaven. We should not study to please men so much as to please God. If we please him, we shall please all who love him, and, as to others, they are not on any account worthy of being pleased at the expense of displeasing God. It is doubtless gratifying to receive the “Well done” of a creature; but this in some cases may arise from ignorance, in others from private friendship; and in some cases men may say, “Well done,” when, in the sight of Him who judges the heart, and recognizes the springs of action, our work may be ill done. And even if we have done comparatively well, we must not rest satisfied with the approbation of our friends. Many have sat down contented with the plaudits of their hearers, spoiled and ruined. It is the “Well done” *at the last day* which we should seek, and with which only we should be satisfied. There have been young ministers, of very promising talents, who have been absolutely nursed to death with human applause, and the hopes they inspired blighted and blasted by the flattery of the weak and inconsiderate. The sound of “Well done” has been reiterated in their ears so often, that at last (poor little minds!) they have thought, Surely it *was* well done; they have inhaled the delicious draught, they have sat down to enjoy it, they have relaxed their efforts, and, after their little hour of popular applause, they have retired behind the scenes, and become of little or no account in the Christian world; and, what is worse, their spirituality has declined, and they have sunk down into a state of desertion, dispiritedness, and inactivity, as regards this world, and of uncertainty, if not of fearful forebodings, as to another. . . . My brother, you may sit down when God says, “Well done!” for then your trust will be discharged; but it is at your peril that you rest satisfied with any thing short of this. Keep that reward in view, and you will not, I trust, be unfaithful in the service of your Lord.⁸⁵

83 Fuller, *Works*, 1:496.

84 Fuller, *Works*, 1:499.

85 Fuller, *Works*, 1:499-500.