

IDEAS HAVE CONSEQUENCES

BY ELDER ZACK GUESS

It is certainly true that ideas *do* have consequences--sometimes very important ones. This is certainly true in the area of theology. Practice is always, whether consciously or unconsciously, based on doctrine. Doctrine is the root; practice is the fruit. Doctrine is the foundation; practice is the superstructure. Sometimes, to a superficial observer, the relationship between the two may not be immediately apparent, but it is there and will eventually be manifest to all.

This is true, for example, in the area of pastoral counseling. For much of the first half of the twentieth century most of what was called “Christian” counseling was not Christian at all, because it was based on ideas that had been borrowed from Freud and other theorists who were hostile to God’s Word. Many well-meaning Christian pastors used these flawed practices which were based on false ideas. They were sincere but they did not realize the implications of what they were doing. Thankfully, Jay E. Adams and others were blessed to think through the problem and to realize that good results would not be achieved by acting on false principles. Christian counseling, in the true sense of the term, would have to be based on Christian presuppositions.

This same principle holds in the work of evangelism. There are a lot of activities that might go by the name of evangelism but that is only true evangelism which is based on correct theology. Some people do not want to consider theology when evangelism is being considered. They think that the only thing that is important is that the “gospel” is being preached to as many people as possible. The flaw in this thinking is basic and lies in this: The gospel cannot be preached unless those who preach it really know what the gospel is! It is commendable to be zealous, but zeal is not enough. There was a young man with a great zeal who lived in the time of King David. There was a battle and he wanted to be the one to run and tell the outcome. Joab tried to dissuade him and asked, “Wherefore wilt thou run, my son, seeing that thou hast no tidings ready?” But the young man ran anyway even though he did not have anything to tell when he reached his destination. (II Sam. 18:22-29). Similarly, in the New Testament, the Lord Jesus denounced those who had a great zeal to “evangelize” but who carried a false gospel. He said: “Woe unto you, scribes and Pharisees, hypocrites! For ye compass sea and land to make one proselyte, and when he is made, ye make him twofold more the child of hell than yourselves.” (Matt. 23:15). The Savior was not denouncing zeal here; He was denouncing false doctrine. We must have our doctrine right before our evangelism will be right.

We must tell the right message in the right way!

God dictates both the right message and the right method.

Andrew Fuller ● John Gill

For most of the nineteenth century there was a great struggle among the Baptists in the United States and in the British Isles over the subject of evangelism. The struggle may have seemed to a superficial observer to be confined to methodology. But a more careful observer would soon discover that the real, fundamental issues that underlay the dispute were doctrinal. The two schools of thought that emerged were identified by the appellations “Fullerites” and “Gillites.” These designations came from the names of two English theologians. One was John Gill of London. He was born in 1697 and died in 1771. The other was Andrew Fuller of Kettering. He was born in 1754 and died in 1815. These men agreed on very many points of doctrine and both claimed to be orthodox Baptists. But there were some very vital points where they believed and taught differently, and it was these differences among their followers which caused a great division among the Baptists in both the British Isles and in North America. This was not a sudden division. There was a lot of agitation among Baptists on the disputed points of doctrine for several decades. The trouble began for all practical purposes when Fuller published a book entitled The Gospel Worthy of All Acceptation. The dissemination of some of the ideas contained in this book ultimately led to something radically new among the Baptists. The Baptist Missionary Society was formed in Kettering, England in 1792. This is the date usually given to define the beginning of the so-called Modern Mission Movement among the Baptists.

This movement, with its new *doctrines* and *practices* split the Baptist family.

Sometimes there must be divisions among people who do not believe the same things about important subjects. An old prophet asked the question many years ago, “Can two walk together, except they be agreed?” (Amos 3:3). The obvious answer is “no.” Those who disagree on fundamental matters cannot walk together. On the other hand, it is very sinful when professing Christians separate from fellowship with each other on matters that are not vital. Paul tells Christians that we should be, “Endeavouring to keep the unity of the Spirit in the bond of peace.” (Eph. 4:3). Solomon said that one of the things that the Lord hates is, “he that soweth discord among brethren.” (Prov. 6:19). The Lord Jesus said, “Blessed are the peacemakers: for they shall be called the children of God.” (Matt. 5:9). The disputants in the theological struggle that is being considered here were aware of these principles. They knew what a serious matter that going their separate ecclesiastical ways was. This is why the process of division took so long. Serious minded brethren fervently wrestled with the issues. Many of them tried to find common ground on which to base their fellowship. They held in common such basic Christian doctrines as the Trinity, Total Depravity, and many others. But, after much soul-searching, the people who eventually became known as “Old School,” or “Primitive” Baptists thought that they must separate from those who became generally known as “New School,” or “Missionary” Baptists.

The question we must ask is this: Were the Old School brethren justified in their actions? Obviously they thought they were. But many people, then and now, did not think they were. Some people believe that the differences were not great

enough to justify a separation. They say that the theology of John Gill and that of Andrew Fuller were essentially the same. If they are right, then the Old School Baptists did a terrible thing! They tore the Baptist family asunder for no good reason. However, if the Old School brethren were correct in their stand, we owe them our undying gratitude. They were heroes of the faith who were caustically criticized as they made a noble but very unpopular stand.

Theological Differences

The most glaring difference in the theologies of Gill and Fuller dealt with the very heart of the doctrine of salvation, the Atonement. Atonement, here, is used in the sense of redemption, that is, the payment for sin. Gill and his followers held to the Biblical doctrine of a Limited Atonement or of Particular Redemption. This simply means that the atonement is limited to the elect children of God. The atonement was not intended by God for anyone else. Redemption was, therefore, particular. It was only for the elect. The Baptists who held to this doctrine, including John Gill, were called Particular Baptists. There were other Baptists in England and in North America who were called General Baptists. They were called this because they openly believed in and taught the doctrine of General Atonement. That is, they taught that Christ had shed His blood for each member of the human race.

Fuller claimed to be a Particular Baptist. He never embraced or taught a full-blown doctrine of General Atonement. However, he introduced a theory of the atonement which his opponents said was a halfway road to that doctrine. There is no question that Fuller introduced something that was new and different. The Baptist Encyclopedia of William Cathcart says concerning Fuller: "His views of the atonement, however, were innovations to the English Baptists of his day, which stirred up vigorous opposition." An American Baptist historian, David Benedict, published a book in 1859 entitled Fifty Years Among The Baptists. He mentioned that forty years previously there had been a lot of agitation among the Baptists because of the "modifications" to their creeds which had been introduced by Andrew Fuller. He said concerning Fuller: "This famous man maintained that the atonement of Christ was general in its nature, but particular in its application, in opposition to our old divines, who held that Christ died for the elect only." Benedict also said that the Fuller system was not well received by "the staunch defenders of the old theory of a limited atonement."

The question, then, is not whether Fuller introduced something new among the Particular Baptists. He emphatically did. The question to be answered is how important were these innovations? Did the opponents of Fuller overreact? Were the differences serious enough to cause what became a rift of fellowship in the Particular Baptist family? Tom Nettles, in his recent book, By His Grace and for His Glory, says that "the differences in their theologies are largely overdrawn." (P.110) If this assessment is true, then the Particular Baptists did, indeed, react too strongly and caused an unnecessary schism in the Baptist family.

However, many Baptists, both then and now, did not and do not believe that the old Baptists reacted too strongly against the doctrine of Andrew Fuller. They

have contended the Fuller doctrine is radically different from the old, orthodox view of the limited scope and design of the atonement. William Rushton, an English Particular Baptist, published a book in 1831 entitled A Defense of Particular Redemption. His thesis is that Fuller wrote in such an artful way that the differences between him and his opponents seemed to be of little importance. Nevertheless, said Rushton, the differences are great. He said that Fuller did not want to be considered to be an open opponent of Particular Redemption. Neither did he want to side totally with the General Baptists and say that Christ died equally for all men. He was actually accusing Fuller of speaking out of both sides of his mouth. Fuller taught that Christ's death was sufficient for all of mankind, but was applied only to the elect. Rushton would call this double talk. He said, "It is absurd to represent Christ as paying a ransom sufficient for all, when he intended only to redeem some! Or to affirm that Christ is a sufficient Savior of those whom he never intended to save!" He further said, "Hence the word of God never represents the sufficiency of the atonement as more extensive than the design of the atonement." Once more, he said, "The atonement of Christ cannot be both indefinite and special." Rushton called Fuller's teaching on the atonement an "uncertain, self-contradictory system {which} has led many to suppose that it depends on our believing whether Christ died for us or not. According to such persons, our believing makes it true that Christ died for us. Such a sentiment is contrary both to Scripture and to every principle of right reasoning."

Another man who saw a great deal of difference between the views of Fuller and those of the advocates of Particular Redemption was J. P. Boyce, a prominent member of the faculty of the Southern Baptist Theological Seminary during the last half of the nineteenth century. He wrote much about the doctrine of Atonement in his Abstract of Systematic Theology. Boyce considered Fuller's theory to be so different from what he called the "Calvinistic" theory held by the old Particular Baptists, that he considered it as a totally separate theory. In criticism of Fuller's teachings Boyce said it ascribes such a nature to the atonement "as makes it only a method of reconciliation for the people of God, and not actual reconciliation."

Conclusion

The Particular Baptists in England and the Old School or Primitive Baptists of the United States were fully justified in rejecting the teachings of Andrew Fuller and his followers regarding the doctrine of the atonement. Most of Fuller's followers soon began to openly advocate the theory of General Redemption, that is that Christ died for each individual of the human race and sincerely desires their salvation. The good old brethren could see where Fuller's ideas would lead. They were duty bound to lift up their voices and pens against this false teaching. It was not easy for them to do so. They were severely criticized. They were called a lot of unkind names. They were sometimes lonely, but they had to be faithful to the truth. The present writer, for one, holds these staunch old warriors of the faith in high regard. May the Lord give us the same dedication for truth in our day.

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