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Dan Fuller and Centered-Set Faith

On the scent

Many of my friends feel like they're on the scent of something exciting and fun that connects the experiences both of longtime Christians and of longtime secularists in a profound way. Is there a theological understanding which could help make sense of that "scent?"

Happily, maybe we aren't starting this conversation in a theological vacuum. Among many influences, one could make a case that a particularly profound scholarly influence is from a retired Fuller Theological Seminary professor named Daniel P. Fuller, the son of Fuller's founder Charles Fuller. Dan (I was a student under Fuller) taught there for forty years (1953 to 1993). Just before his retirement, he came out with his magnum opus, *The Unity of the Bible: Unfolding God's Plan for Humanity*.

It's a difficult read in many respects. I've recommended the book to many people and few of them have gotten the benefits from it that I'd hoped they would. This essay will attempt to distill a few ways in which, to my mind, *Unity* charts a course towards a theology that might well serve us as a starting point.

The essay has occasional moments of Blue Ocean jargon! So, without explanation, I allude to "stages" of faith or to "centered" or "bounded" sets. I talk about graduates of this exploring-faith course called "Seek." These are major concepts for folks who are most conversant in all things Blue Ocean. If you'd like to feel like you're in the in-crowd, you can watch short videos on these things at the links I've given. Or you can get a fuller explanation and exploration of these thoughts in my book *Not the Religious Type: Confessions of a Turncoat Atheist*. But, alternatively, you can also just keep reading when those terms come up and you should still get the spirit of this essay just fine.

The Challenges of *The Unity of the Bible*

Dan's titular urge in the book was to argue that the Bible spoke in concert with itself—it's a unity. His first few chapters argue that point, to my mind persuasively. And yet the book's enduring impact on me and a few friends actually *hasn't* been that point, but rather its textured and arresting look at what that unity *is*.

His thinking process is very detail-oriented, even as his task is so big-picture. This detail-orientation is a strength. Dan's intellectual honesty (as I see it) compels him to rebut an array of theological objections and to argue for a rich and comprehensive, whole-Bible theology. That makes for quite a feast for the patient reader, who will learn about the formation of the biblical canon and about

apostolic authority and about the role of the Holy Spirit in biblical interpretation. The reader will be invited into a brief but provocative survey of the major world religions (on the terms of the book). The reader will engage in a lively dialogue with Calvin and Luther and Dan's former theology professor Karl Barth and a few of the church fathers and (most profoundly) Jonathan Edwards. If the central benefits of the book are kept in mind, all of this is all to the good. It is a—to my mind—wonderful introduction to biblical theology.

But another writer might have taken the richness of *Unity* and written a completely different, much shorter, more focused book. It would have lost the richness I've just described, but it would have gained punch. Dan is, after all, an evangelical writing within a theologically conservative community. His perspectives were not mainstream within that community, so he was defending his view against anticipated evangelical critiques on the terms of the day. So it can seem "proof texty" (though I think this is only true on the surface) and it is *detailed.* The last, very smart, friend I recommended *Unity* to gave up about a third of the way through. His complaint was, "I wasn't sure what I was supposed to be getting out of each chapter." Again, my hope here is to answer that question at least a bit so that the book's strengths—with that larger question settled—can shine.

Here are a few large themes in *Unity*.

Biblical faith is better understood as a doctor's prescription than as a job description.

> ***Isaiah 64:4***
>
> *Since ancient times no one has heard,*
> *no ear has perceived,*
> *no eye has seen any God besides you,*
> *who acts on behalf of those who wait for him.*
>
> ***Acts 17:25***
>
> *(God) is not served by human hands, as if he needed anything.*

God serves us. We don't serve God. We *can't* serve God, if we're to believe Acts 17:25. This is the starting point of all biblical theology. This is the heart of the creation and fall story. This is behind the "obedience of faith" that Abraham's life guides us into.

Now *obedience* to God is central to Fuller's thinking, but the *kind* of obedience in question in crucial. Is our obedience Abraham's **"obedience of faith"** or is it the **"obedience of works"** that got Israel rejected by the end of the Hebrew Bible?

The starting-point question is: do we believe faith in God will make anyone's life actually *better*? Do we believe in a living and active God? Church leaders have often pointed out the commands of the Bible, but this adds the insight that those commands are very rarely lacking *reasons*. We're promised that *if* we do the command in question, we'll be *rewarded* in some fashion. *If* we delight ourselves in the Lord, we'll receive the desires of our heart. Fuller's theology has often proven hard to swallow for

those in hard Stage 2, because it demands more than "firmly held convictions;" it demands an ongoing experience of the promise-keeping, living God that the Bible describes. It demands interaction and living relationship.

Isaiah 64:4 tells us that this God is different than all other gods in world history. This God "*works for* those who wait for him." Presumably the earlier gods have all demanded that their followers work for *them*. But that would make the god our *client—we* would be the benefactor, the "*patron*" to the needy god who needs to use us to get some benefit they can't get on their own. But Paul in Acts 17:25 tells us that the one thing we can know about this God, even if we miss everything else, is that he's all-sufficient. This is good news for us, because it starts the process of telling us that this God's only motive is to do good things for us that we very much need done. Consider how Jeremiah pitches this:

> ***Jeremiah 32:40-41***
>
> *I will make an everlasting covenant with them: I will never stop doing good to them… I will rejoice in doing them good and will assuredly plant them in this land with all my heart and soul.*

This is the good news of the gospel. This is the treasure in the field. We've stumbled into relationship with the all-powerful creator God whose personal mission statement is to "rejoice in doing us good."

Now, as Stage 4 would teach us, this is a deep and mysterious truth that could require much more than our lifetimes to explore to the depth it deserves. It raises the classic challenges to faith—most notably: if God is so determined to do us good, why do we go through such hardships? But our life's task becomes to experience this connection to the always-loving, always-giving God, and to help others encounter this God as well.

As we connect with this giving God, what we experience is *joy*. It's this joy that drives the kind of obedience that connects us to God. Joy becomes a big theme with Fuller.

Jesus continues this theme by specifying that he's a doctor who only comes to help people who regard themselves as sick. In other words, Jesus comes to give us things we very much need. He doesn't recruit us to do things for *him* that he can't do for himself.

Fuller takes Jesus' analogy and proposes a **doctor analogy**. Where other religious traditions—including most Christian traditions—would regard God as our **employer** and would see our role as offering our employer services he needs done in order to merit our paycheck, Jesus says that any act of obedience is something we do *for our own benefit*, much as a patient only takes her heart medication not to pay off a debt to her doctor, but in hopes that this "obedience" will help her feel better and live a long, happy life.

In my church, we pretty much never teach stage theory or centered-set, but we actually teach the doctor analogy quite a bit. We teach it (twice) in Seek. We teach it in our newcomer's class. We teach it in our discipleship class. We do this to focus on the question: Why do we obey God? Why do

we, say, lead a small group when it takes so much time? Or tithe? Or care for the poor around us? Or stay faithful to our spouse? Are we doing it because "God deserves our obedience" or we need to "honor God?" Do we do it because "the Bible teaches it?" In the end, Jesus' doctor analogy would suggest we do it not for *God*, but for *us*—as a prescription God has specifically given us for our joy and health.

This makes a major difference in how we preach. This is why we use "tips" rather than calls to obedience (or conversion). This is why we're loathe to tell people to do something because "the Bible says it" or because they "should" do it. We see it as our obligation to push a little deeper. If the Bible says we're advised to do something, *why*? How will that act of obedience, in point of fact, give us the kind of life we're looking for?

This also shapes our understanding of evangelism. It tells us that *all people* want what Jesus has to offer, because (as Pascal famously teaches in his Pensee 250) one thing we can know about all people is that they want their own happiness. If only Jesus has the prescriptions for that happiness—in his *person* every bit as much as in his *teachings* (it's often noted that Jesus doesn't say that his *teachings* are "the life," but that *he* is "the life")—then we can take it to the bank that everyone we ever meet wants what Jesus has to offer. It mellows us out that we don't need to *convince* anyone of anything. If we can help someone—to use centered-set language—"turn their arrow" Jesus' way, Jesus himself promises to offer them the perfect prescription for their health. This is why we've found praying for our six to be so powerful. We don't need to manipulate this—to see it as an obligatory first step before the *really* important step of people "telling their friends about Jesus" or even inviting them to church. If their prayers actually have any impact in terms of helping their friends turn their arrows Jesus' way, their friends are guaranteed to experience Jesus. And that proves very powerful indeed.

God's one mission is to spread the glory of his goodness throughout the earth.

It's noteworthy that God seems to equate his "glory" with his "goodness"—shown to us by offering useful things to those who put their trust in him.

> ***Exodus 33:18-19***
>
> *Then Moses said, "Now show me your glory." And the LORD said, "I will cause all my goodness to pass in front of you…"*

We get verses where God's mission of spreading his glory throughout the earth is spelled out quite explicitly.

> ***Psalm 46:10***
>
> *Be still, and know that I am God;*
> *I will be exalted among the nations,*
> *I will be exalted in the earth.*

God uses this rationale to explain his actions.

Isaiah 48:9-11

For my own name's sake I delay my wrath;
for the sake of my praise I hold it back from you,
so as not to destroy you completely…
For my own sake, for my own sake, I do this.
How can I let myself be defamed?
I will not yield my glory to another.

This ties into God's goal in creation itself, which was to display his glory and praiseworthiness. God didn't, God forbid, create the world out of, say, *loneliness* (which would prove he was limited and deficient and needed to use us to gain something he lacked). God makes it especially clear that he didn't create out of need when he delays creating the world. Evidently he was doing just fine before we came along.

Fuller says it this way.

> *Now the basic thrust of God's whole purpose in creation and redemption has become clear. It is that the earth might be filled with the glory of his desire to service people and, calling upon all his omniscience and omnipotence, to do them good with his whole heart and soul.*
>
> *(*Unity, *p. 136)*

The great sin, then, is to spurn this benevolence by distrusting that it comes from a passionate, good heart towards us. Luther put it this way:

> *Could we ascribe to a man anything greater than truthfulness and righteousness and perfect goodness? On the other hand, there is no way in which we can show greater contempt for a man than to regard him as false and wicked and to be suspicious of him, as we do when we do not trust him.*
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> ("The Freedom of a Christian," in *Martin Luther: Selections from His Writings*, John Dillenberger [New York, Doubleday, 1961], p. 59)

This fundamental sin of distrust is at the heart of the Fall of Humankind. When Adam and Eve were told (a) that they could eat of all the trees of the Garden, that they had the run of this most-abundant demonstration of God's love of and goodness towards them possible and (b) with the one exception that they were not to eat of the one tree (the Tree of the Knowledge of Good and Evil), we're to understand some key things. This forbidden tree, for instance, did *not* provide their *first introduction to right and wrong*—presumably God would *want* them to have that and not forbid them from it. Instead, this was the temptation towards finding knowledge of how to run their lives towards a happy future *without God*, to "be like God" to themselves. Where, before eating of this tree, they had perfect trust of this all-benevolent God, with this act they were declaring their autonomy. They were offering

Luther's greatest of all insults to God—a formal declaration that, despite all evidence to the contrary, they didn't trust that God's whole passion in life was to do them good with all his heart and soul.

When they eat of this tree, when they declare their distrust of God, their immediate response is *shame*. They recognize immediately that they've bitten off far more than they can chew. They can't possibly figure out how to navigate themselves into a life of blessing—it's far too big a task for any human, almost as if we're a child of three in the middle of a scary urban center who says to our parent, "Don't worry about it. I can take things from here. Thanks for your help up to this point, but I won't be needing you anymore."

Jesus, however, offers us the *antidote* to the Fall in Matthew 18:13—"Change and become like little children." Now we recognize that we *are*, in *fact*, that child of three in the middle of an urban center…but this time we also recognize that our loving parent is right beside us. "Becoming like little children" means that we take all our cares to God in praise and confident expectation. "Come to me all you who are (sinfully) heavy laden."

Jonathan Edwards pitches that *God's holiness consists in his delight in himself.* God is perfect goodness, perfect love, perfect benevolence. If he were to indicate in any way that that was no big deal, he would cease to be holy because he would both be lying and be pointing us away from our only hope of joy and health.

Psalm 147:10-11

His pleasure is not in the strength of the horse,
nor his delight in the power of human legs;
the LORD delights in those who fear him,
who put their hope in his unfailing love.

What, then, is "total depravity?" It's that we all have treated God in the most insulting way possible by registering again and again a vote of no confidence in his promises. The evidence of this? Our refusal to give thanks in all circumstances (1 Thes. 5:18).

I find myself wondering if Stage 4 coheres with "becoming like a little child" in this sense. Stage 2 and 3 are tempted towards great burdens—say "defending Christendom" for Stage 2 or "fighting the idiots in Stage 2" for Stage 3. Richard Rohr talks about how, if we navigate our spiritual journey most profoundly, we become a "holy fool." In Stage 4, while some of us might know quite a lot about quite a lot of things, we've lost the burden of *having* to know things and prove things and fight things (though God may call us to any of those things). Instead, we've learned the joy of casting our burdens on God and taking the prescriptions he offers.

Assurance of salvation exists…but it's future-oriented, not past-oriented, and it works itself out day-by-day.

Saving faith is predominantly about what God *will do* for us rather than what he has *already done* for us by sending Jesus to die for us on the cross. This is not to say that Jesus' death on the cross

isn't central to our saving faith—his death on the cross gives us solid evidence to believe that God *will* forgive our sins. But assurance of salvation, in this view, is not a once-for-all moment, but a day-to-day experience of God.

Each day, we have the chance to ask ourselves whether our "hearts are happy in God." If the answer is yes, then we're assured of salvation at that moment, because we're trusting God that his promises over our life are true. However, if we're distressed, we're encouraged to regain contentment and peace by "[fighting] the good fight of the faith" (1 Tim. 6:12), which we do by claiming "the very great and precious promises" in Scripture (2 Peter 1:4).

This is a big phrase in Fuller's thought.

Our great task in life, in many ways, is to **fight the fight of faith.**

And the way we do that, from Fuller's perspective, is by believing the Bible's promises. Do we believe that God's passion to do us good is genuine? Do we believe that this passion is stronger than our own mistakes and sins? If so, we're participating in God's great mission on earth—which, again, is to spread the glory of his goodness throughout the earth. If not, we're participating in another big phrase of Fuller's: **an evil heart of unbelief.**

Fuller details ten specific states of unbelief that we will need to learn how to fight (through believing the appropriate promises in the Bible). Since writing *Unity*, he's detailed a few more. But here is his starting point of evidence of an evil heart of unbelief.

1. False guilt
2. Anxiety
3. Covetousness
4. Regret
5. Jealousy and envy
6. Bitterness
7. Impatience
8. Listlessness and despondency
9. Indulgent desires
10. Self-adulation

Starting on page 279, he details these states of unbelief so helpfully that I know many preachers who regularly preach through the whole list, one by one. I haven't done this yet, but it seems inevitable.

Philippians 1:25 and Romans 15:13 tell us, then that *joy* is the barometer of our faith. (Rather than, say, moral rectitude, as important as moral rectitude is to Fuller [note #9, above, for instance]. But "indulgent desires" are *evidence* of the issue rather than the issue itself, in Fuller's view. Joylessness, lack of trust in God's promises, is the issue.) If our joy is low for some period of time, if we experience a stretch of time when our heart is *not* happy in God, do we risk hell were we to die during this time? Fuller's answer is "probably not" if we've previously fought the fight of faith. His basis for

this is Exodus 34:6-7, where we learn that God is "slow to anger." This tells us that there will come a time when God *will* anger, but that there's a gap between that and the earlier time when we've provoked him (by distrusting him against all reason). So while we don't need to have any fear of hell after a particularly demoralizing day, nonetheless each day we should feel very encouraged to fight the fight of faith that day. Some unknown day, God *will* anger if we've abandoned this key activity.

What sort of promises might we find in Scripture and how might they help us? Well, certainly the big kahuna is the most famous promise of all: Romans 8:28. "God works everything for good for those who love him and are called according to his purpose." But Fuller sees the Bible as riddled with promises. Here are two that are characteristic.

> ***Jeremiah 29:11***
>
> *For I know the plans I have for you," declares the LORD, "plans to prosper you and not to harm you, plans to give you hope and a future."*
>
> ***Romans 8:37***
>
> *No, in all these things we are more than conquerors through him who loved us.*

Perhaps you can see how meditating on Jer. 29:11 might move you beyond an evil heart of unbelief on a day when your circumstances seem discouraging. And Rom. 8:37 gets a particular pride of place for Fuller. What he sees it teaching us is that, for the person who trusts in God's goodness, things that the devil throws at that person to discourage them not only won't harm them but will become positive blessings to them. This is how they become *more than* conquerors. ("Conquering" alone would mean that the devil didn't defeat them. But this is "more than" that.) As Fuller puts it, through trusting God's promises, "stumbling blocks become stepping stones."

Some of my friends who take this challenge to fight the fight of faith very seriously find Fuller's specific approach to be a little heady. Rather than searching the scriptures for appropriate promises to believe to restore their happy heart in God, they directly go to God in prayer as they ask for help to restore a happy heart in God. One friend today told me how powerful it's been for God to say something to him as simple as "Chill out!" With that word from God, he suddenly found that he had the *power* to "chill out," something he'd lacked before chatting with God about this. And then his heart was happy in God. (While this may or may not describe the problem my friend was facing, for those of us who believe in the spiritual dimension to life, we often find that fighting the fight of faith breaks off demonization.)

Fuller proposes an intriguing analogy for how this perspective will help us "serve God"—something some scriptures warn us *against* doing (as previously noted), but which does come up in other settings (we're supposed, for instance, to "serve the Lord with gladness"). Fuller notes that we're *not* supposed to "serve money." But, he asks, how *would* we "serve money" if we were to foolishly make that evil choice? We *wouldn't* serve it by doing kind things for it that it needed done. We wouldn't, say, make dinner for our money. We wouldn't drive it to the airport. Money *can't* be served

that way from us. It's not alive. Rather the way we'd serve money in this evil way would be to devote a great deal of effort to putting it in a position to serve *us*. We'd stay up late reading spread sheets. We'd follow the fortunes of our favorite stocks throughout the day. We'd work as hard as possible to put ourselves in a position for money to benefit *us*. This, Fuller suggests, is exactly how we're commanded to serve God.

> *We worship God when we bank our hope for an eternally happy future both on the prospect of always being able to share with him his joy and on his integrity to keep his great and priceless promises. In this way we render the greatest possible honor to him, as did Abraham, who 'gave glory to God, being fully persuaded that God had power to do what he had promised' (Romans 4:20-21).*
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> *(*Unity*, p. 151)*

A final note: Fuller makes what, to me, is a very compelling case why "praying a prayer of salvation" is nonsensical as a marker of being saved in a future-faith orientation.

> *Whenever a client retains a patron of some sort (lawyer, doctor, coach, etc.), the implication is that the client is going to remain committed to the patron for as long a time as it takes to receive the desired benefit. So just as it would be a travesty for sick patients to have confidence in their doctors only during the first consultation and thereafter to ignore their advice, so it is unthinkable that people could receive forgiveness from God just at their first act of faith and after that see no further need to believe and obey him. Furthermore, faith is the way God's glory and goodness become externalized in the world he created and the history that he ordained. Therefore a single act of faith, followed by years of unrighteous living because one never again believed and acted on any of God's promises, would go completely contrary to his whole purpose in creation.*
>
> *So the test of the genuineness of one's first act of faith is its ability to persevere and, despite temporary setbacks, to fill one again with all joy and peace in believing. Paul accordingly said, 'By this gospel you are saved, if you hold firmly to the word I preached to you. Otherwise you have believed in vain" (1 Cor. 15:2, cf. Rom. 11:19-22). This necessity for faith to persevere is why Paul told the Philippians to 'continue to work out your salvation with fear and trembling [lest unbelief overtake you]" (Phil. 2:12)."*
>
> *(*Unity, *p. 319)*

I've noted that churches trying to promote a centered-set, Stage 4 faith are much less concerned with classic altar calls than many churches are. Rather, they focus their efforts on helping people fight the fight of faith daily and thereby experience the living, loving God day by day. And, as a result, they often find many previously hardened secularists coming to faith in Jesus. Again, they often employ "tips" that help people try what Fuller calls "the obedience of faith." They encourage people to try the prescriptions the Bible lays out to get a particular benefit. When people do try those

prescriptions and discover that God very much does give them the desired benefit, they're motivated to see if this patron God will continue to give them a hopeful, encouraging life.

My present small group came out of our last Seek class. Two women there, having taken our membership class as atheists, chided me afterwards for having mentioned that one qualifier for membership was wanting to follow Jesus. They were both offended. They had no convictions about Jesus, yet they liked our church community and wanted to be a part of it. Why were we being so exclusionary? While the women might have had a point worth considering, within three months of their comment, they were both baptized in a liturgy that included "do you ask for the forgiveness of your sins by believing in Jesus' sacrifice for you on the cross?" That change in perspective didn't come through an altar call or through asking them to pray any particular prayer at all. It came through a series of encouragements to try the prescriptions Jesus laid out. As of this writing, they're both as enthused about what Jesus might mean for their lives as any people in memory.

Some possible implications of a focus on "fighting the fight of faith"

There are some striking implications, to my mind, of this way of understanding "the fight of faith."

A major implication is that, when we're distressed about some presenting problem, the initial issue *isn't* the problem itself—it's our *distress* over the problem. This goes against all our instincts, but it strikes me as having real power.

So, for instance, I've had many conversations about men who struggle with internet porn addiction. In most church circles, this is regarded, understandably, as a particularly damaging sin. In one situation that comes to mind, a ministry leader confessed his porn addiction along with his nearly-debilitating fear and guilt about it. Would it ruin his marriage? He felt that he, clearly, should be stripped of all ministry responsibilities given this great failure. And so he was. Yet what if his first step towards health here *isn't* to target how to get out of his porn addiction, as desirable as that clearly would be to all parties? What if his first step of faith would be to fight the fight of faith about his fear and distress? Do God's promises over his life still apply, even in the midst of this dismaying problem? How might he regain hope that God can handle even something this upsetting?

Should he be able to find a heart that's happy in God *even while he hasn't conquered the presenting problem*, perhaps then he's ready to look to God (and God's prescriptions) for help in that problem. Clearly he's served by not embracing the stress of ministry while he's under such evident stress. Clearly he's served by the wise choice to confess his sin and ask for help. But the immediate issue, in this view, isn't his "moral failure." It's the misery.

I talk with people who are distressed at being overweight—a common problem in today's America and one that I share. Is the appropriate pastoral response to such people to advise them on how they might lose their weight (as difficult as that is for most overweight people in today's America)? Or is the first response to help the person learn to fight the fight of faith over their misery at their self-image and their own perpetual sense of failure? Should they be able to find a heart that's happy in God,

even while they remain overweight, might that both please God and offer them the kind of life they're looking for, even if they never lose the weight? And might it also free them to at least have a shot at addressing their problem more powerfully now that they've shed the fear and self-loathing around this problem?

And yet this can feel unsettling. Berating ourselves for failing to satisfy a moral code at least gives us the safety of definite boundaries. Does this leave us without clear guidelines? This question gets to the heart of some key theological distinctions that might be worth underscoring.

You'll recall that **God's one mission is to spread the glory of his goodness throughout the earth.** What's at stake here is not *our* righteousness, but *God's*. Can *he* truly deliver on his promise to do us good with all his heart and soul? You'll also recall that what was at stake in the fall of humankind was not a somehow-"evil" understanding of right and wrong that came from eating of the fruit, but rather an evil inclination to take on the burden of creating our own happy futures apart from God.

An emphasis on fighting the fight of faith in the face of our own shortcomings forces the question of whether God can give us a blessed life even when we can't seem to solve "x" problem. Humanly speaking, we're tempted to regard that question as conditional: well, if God can empower us to *solve* "x," then, yes, he can give us a happy life. If not, then not. But fighting the fight of faith changes that calculus.

I think of a friend who died this past year from colon cancer. During his illness, he talked with me at great length about his determination to fight the fight of faith along the way and about how hard it was at certain stages. As his strength failed more and more, he found that even prayer was too taxing physically. And so he learned Catholic practices of prayers of silence and found that they helped restore his happy heart in God, even with the very real chance that he'd widow his young wife and leave his young children fatherless. The very last day I saw him, five days before his death, he talked about his depression at the rapid losses he was facing—how a month before he'd been able to play ball with his boys, how a week before he'd been able to climb stairs, how a day before he'd been able to keep food down. But that morning he'd realized he had the strength to stand up next to his bed, and so he did. He asked God what he should do and he found himself, as he put it, singing a goofy, five-year-old-level song of praise to God. And depression broke off of him and he was again at peace with God. To my mind my friend "believed God and it was reckoned to him as righteousness" viz. Romans 4, even as his presenting problem wasn't solved.

Now this sort of unsolved problem might seem different than an unsolved *moral* problem. Calvin—as we'll talk about in just a moment—most certainly thought so. As Fuller details, Calvin's response was that what was required was a decision of faith—"praying a prayer" if you will. That done, salvation was assured. How then to ensure that people—who, in his eyes, were very much "totally depraved" and inclined towards evil by nature—would behave in a moral fashion in the gap between the moment of their salvation and the moment of their death? The answer? "Lash people with the law." Use the commands of the Bible like a whip to drive people towards godliness—even if, of course, their salvation was not at stake (although he left room to question if their original prayer of salvation

was “sincere”). As we’ll discuss in a moment, for many people, the fruit of this pushes towards Pharisaism, towards an “obedience of works,” towards the sort of religion that gives religion a bad name.

As we fight the fight of faith, what then are our boundaries for our own behavior? The answer: Reality. Presumably immoral behavior will not work as a good prescription for our health. As we lie, cheat and steal—as it were—we will not find our lives moving towards the blessed lives both described in the Bible and that our hearts desire. Our hearts will then cry out for help from our only hope for deliverance. As Paul puts it in Romans 7, we’ll cry out “Who will deliver me from this body of death?” We then will find ourselves motivated to take God’s prescriptions for our health as best as we can pull off at the moment in question. Why should this man with the internet porn addiction want healing from it? Is it so that God can again be happy with him now that he’s finally licked his persistently sinful behavior? Are the stakes of licking his addiction that he’ll go to hell if he doesn’t solve this problem? Or is this the sort of thing in which he’d be advised to take all of God’s prescriptions that he can find so that he can have the kind of happy life he’s hoping for?

Now Fuller allows both for positive *and* negative reasons to take God’s prescriptions. Commands in the Bible come with both rewards *and* threats. But the central threat to our ultimate well-being is not poor eating habits, say. It’s persistent refusal to “believe God and have our faith reckoned as righteousness.” It’s ignoring our evil heart of unbelief. It’s scorning having a happy heart in God.

By definition, joy overflows to other people who need it.

I’ve had many provocative conversations about what’s classically called “evangelism”. Some of my friends call evangelism “the third rail” that’s basically the deal-breaker for many secular people in considering biblical faith. In a secular, post-Christian western world, evangelism is seen as an unaccountable power play in which you—for reasons that escape even *you* (perhaps “someone told you to do it and you’re afraid you’ll go to hell if you don’t, so here goes”)—arm-twist a soon-to-be-ex-friend of yours to join your cultural club and leave their friends and way of life behind.

And yet again and again I hear stories of Seek grads who’ve just experienced faith themselves and who regard themselves as extremely secular—as the sorts who clearly would never “evangelize” anyone—who eagerly encourage their equally-secular friends to…come to a church service with us…or try Seek…or start to pray. So these people *loathe* the prospect of evangelism…and yet seemingly *do* it and do it well and cheerfully. How is that possible?

Fuller argues that we don’t have saving faith unless we “increase our joy by exercising benevolent love to all other people.” He suggests an analogy for this by quoting an obscure German poet, Christoph Tiedge (1752-1803) who, in his poem “Urania” wrote: *Joy that we share is doubly joyous.*

This becomes a key aphorism to Fuller, who paraphrases it as **“a shared joy is a doubled joy.”** Joy, by definition, overflows. As we have a happy heart in the promises of God despite the external

problems we face each day, our joy will overflow to those around us—as has proven true with these Seek grads.

Fuller mentions two Scriptures in support of this, one that seems a little more "should"-oriented than the other, although even it is centered in abundance rather than scarcity. And so, in 2 Kings 7:3-9, we get a story of two lepers in a besieged city who wander beyond the city walls to discover that, miraculously, their enemies have slaughtered themselves. And the dead bodies are surrounded by incredible food and riches. Initially our heroes indulge themselves in these good things. But then they think about their fellow city-dwellers who are living in near-famine conditions as they believe they're being surrounded by a powerful enemy. Finally one of the lepers says this to the other one.

> ***2 Kings 7:9***
>
> *"We're not doing right. This is a day of good news, and we are keeping it to ourselves. If we wait until daylight, punishment will overtake us. Let's go at once and report this to the royal palace."*

When we discover abundance while our friends are starving, a natural response is to let them know about the feast we've found—if we've *actually* found this feast (rather than, say, finding a wonderful *theory* about a feast).

But Paul even more fully captures this idea that joy definitionally overflows to others when he is imprisoned and chained in his efforts to invite others into Jesus' bounty.

> ***Philippians 1:18***
>
> *But what does it matter? The important thing is that in every way, whether from false motives or true, Christ is preached. And because of this I rejoice.*

Which seems like an amazingly cheery perspective from someone who's imprisoned and chained at the time.

Evangelism, then, only makes sense if:

1. We've had *our* needs met in God
2. We're confident God can and will meet *their* needs.

I can wonder if this sort of overflowing joy only occurs in the aftermath of a Stage 4 encounter. A Stage 2 "conviction" would, by contrast, in many cases leave the person only with the burden of needing to "do something" (unpleasant but necessary) *to* their friends.

"Religion," as commonly understood is what the Bible is warning us against.

A caveat:

Fuller wrote in an earlier era without the sensitivities that have shaped "the new perspective" on Paul. He offers a significant critique of "religion"—wherever it is found, in any tradition worldwide—and

naturally, this is connected to the dispute that Jesus and the early (mainly Jewish) Jesus movement had with other streams within Judaism. The "foil" for this dispute *within* Judaism was the Pharisees, which appears in the gospels and in the writings of Paul, where Paul is in dispute, it seems, with Jewish leaders who were part of the Jesus movement in Jerusalem who either were Pharisees or strongly influenced by the Pharisees.

So before going into Fuller's thought on religion as something the Bible is warning against, it's important to stress what Fuller didn't have access to at the time. That something is a full appreciation of the importance of reading the New Testament critique of the Pharisees in light of the subsequent, sometimes ugly and anti-Semitic, history of the church.

For that, I'll quote David Gushee, who offers a great summary in a piece on the parable of the tax collector and the Pharisee in Luke 18:9-14:

> *The Pharisees come in for quite a pounding in the Gospels. Sometimes in company with other religious leaders such as the scribes and Sadducees, but often singled out, the Pharisees are the target of many withering parables and teachings. Some of the time they are attacked for hyperlegalism, other times for greed, other times for desiring to attract the attention of the crowds for their showy piety. Here the "Pharisee" is used to symbolize those "who trusted in themselves that they were righteous and regarded others with contempt."*
>
> *After the Holocaust, some of the more thoughtful and responsible Christian communions finally realized that one of the factors that contributed to the vicious hatred of Jews that culminated during World War II was the way Christians had been taught in Church to think about Jews and Jewish leaders. They resolved to be as careful with the preaching of adversarial New Testament texts as they possibly could be, and to reject aspects of Christian tradition that had been contemptuous toward Jews, Judaism, or Jewish religious leaders.*
>
> *Meanwhile, biblical scholars were arguing for the likelihood that early Christian conflicts with rabbinic Judaism of the late 1st century affected how the Gospels were written, deepening the anti-Pharisee element beyond what was likely to have actually occurred in Jesus' own day many decades before. (The Pharisees were the forerunners of the rabbis who shaped Judaism after the destruction of the Temple in 70 CE.) This makes historical sense to me and many others who have studied the issue closely.*
>
> *So I do not bring out the Pharisee and tax collector parable at this point in our journey in order to make you feel contempt for 1st-century Jewish Pharisees. No way. The real issue is to prick the consciences of any "who trust in themselves that they are righteous and regard others with contempt." This passage is as clear as it can be in encouraging any who would take Jesus seriously to move as far away as possible from becoming this kind of self-righteous, contemptuous religious person.*

Fuller would certainly concur that the contemporary lessons to be learned from the New Testament critique of the Pharisees actually have nothing to do with the Pharisees, or less with Judaism.

These lessons are all about the way all human beings can adopt a self-righteous, superior posture toward others, can become "religious" in a way that the Pharisees, in their context, embodied.

With that important caveat, we can get back to Fuller's understanding of "religion" as something the Bible is warning against, rather than promoting.

Fuller argues there are two ways of viewing God's law. One, as Abraham is celebrated for doing in Romans 4, is regarding it as a **law of faith**. Here one takes every biblical command as a prescription for one's own health. We "believe God"—that he only tells us to do things that will work good in our lives—and so our faith is "reckoned as righteousness." In a key distinction for Fuller, this faith is **conditional but not merited**. Salvation is by no means *unconditional*. The condition is faith. But it is *unmerited*—while we were sinners, Jesus died for us and so on. So here's a tiny bit of Fuller's take on the obedience of faith that Abraham modeled for us all, as the father of the faithful.

> *When Paul spoke here (Rom. 4) of God's justifying the wicked, he implied that Abraham was forgiven both for all his past sins and also for present evil tendencies that would produce future sins. Or to say it positively, God credited him as righteous while he was still sinful so that God could proceed with the work of imparting the great blessings he had promised to Abraham and his 'seed' (Gen. 12:2-3). The condition Abraham met in order to be forgiven and thus be blessed was simply to believe the promise that his posterity would constitute a large nation that would be protected by God and eventually impart its divine blessings to all other nations.*
>
> *(*Unity*, p. 256)*

However, Romans also talks about how the Israelites of the Old Testament approached the law of Moses "*as if* it were a *law of works*." The implication of the "as if," of course, is that they were gravely mistaken. And how did the Israelites do this? They strangely came to believe that their *possession* of the law made them *superior* to other people. And that superiority, combined with their own refusal to take the law as a doctor's prescription for their own health, made them, for lack of a better word, icky to the surrounding nations, much as the Pharisees in the gospel stories seem icky to most modern readers. Ezekiel paints quite a vivid picture of the consequences of this ickiness.

> ***Ezekiel 5:5-15***
>
> *"This is what the Sovereign LORD says: This is Jerusalem, which I have set in the center of the nations, with countries all around her. Yet in her wickedness she has rebelled against my laws and decrees more than the nations and countries around her. She has rejected my laws and has not followed my decrees.*
>
> *… "I will make you a ruin and a reproach among the nations around you, in the sight of all who pass by. You will be a reproach and a taunt, a warning and an object of horror to the nations around you when I inflict punishment on you in anger and in wrath and with stinging rebuke."*

"A reproach and a taunt!" "A warning and an object of *horror*!" As if the other nations will look at Israel and say, as it were, "My God, what *happened* to them! It's *horrible*!"

This is presented as the ultimate outcome of "religion" in the worst sense of the word. Religion, in this sense, is taking the Bible as a law of works rather than as a law of faith. It's "being a good religious person." It's "fighting against the evil non-religious people."

Fuller uses this perspective as a fundamental critique of what's come to be called "Covenant Theology," which started with Calvin. Perhaps you've heard some of its ideas, most prominent of which is the idea that we humans *could*, hypothetically, be saved through a covenant of works. If we were to perfectly keep the Law of Moses, we'd be saved with or without Jesus. However no human being will, in fact, pull this off because we're sinful. So then, what the Law of Moses was meant to do for the people of Israel was to show them their own sinfulness—that they needed a savior—and thus to prepare them for Jesus. And then Jesus, through *his* meritorious works, would transform this into an unconditional covenant of grace.

Fuller debunks this on many levels. He points out that the law was never meant to be followed perfectly—that's why there was a system of animal and grain sacrifices in place. Human sinfulness and imperfection was assumed in it. Secondly, and more profoundly, Abraham was justified by his obedience of faith long before the law was ever presented to Israel. The Law of Moses itself, coming as it did from a good God, was always meant as a law of faith, as a doctor's prescription, not a job description. When it was taken—erroneously and sinfully (in just the same way as eating of the Tree of the Knowledge of Good and Evil was sinful—it was a power play to justify ourselves without God that led only to misery and shame)—as a job description (a "law of works"), these religious people became the most distasteful people on earth.

And, just to note, many secular people *do* experience this kind of distaste towards some very religious people. This could, of course, reflect mostly on the judgmentalism of the secular people in question. But one wonders if the secular people are sometimes picking up on something very real, which was caused by religious people approaching following God "as if it were a law of works."

Our crucial responses to grace are (1) trust and (2) appreciation.

What then, is required of us if we want to keep receiving these great benefits from God? The benefits from a patron lord only keep coming in response to *continued trust* and *appreciation*.

This, of course, is just a rephrasing of what we've been calling the obedience of faith. But, to put a nub on it, Fuller uses a homespun example to make this point. He quotes from Studs Terkel's seminal book on working men and women in America called *Working*. In it, Terkel quotes a supermarket checker talking about people she works hard for and those she doesn't.

> *She also found joy in giving each customer the fullest service. "What irritates me is when customers get very cocky with me. 'Hurry up,' or 'Cash my check quick.' I don't think this*

> *is right. You wait your time and I'll give you my full, undivided attention. You rush me and you're gonna get nothin'."*
>
> *(Studs Terkel, Working, p. 378.)*

Fuller comments on this anecdote this way.

> *(What) the supermarket checker make(s) clear (is) that, while reimbursement plays an important role, what matters most is the delight in seeing that one is valued by a client for having a skill to meet that client's need. This delight that causes a patron to give 'full and undivided attention' to appreciative and trusting clients is grace.*
>
> *(*Unity*, p. 264.)*

I'm a fan of a short book out of the Jesus Movement of the early 70s called *Prison to Praise* in which the author, Merlin Carothers, forcefully argues for the benefits of overtly praising God for whatever happens to us, particularly for bad things. I asked Dan some years back whether doing this would encapsulate a lot of the pitch that *Unity* is making. He said that, yes, certainly praising God was very important, but that there was a bit more to what he was saying that *just* that. It now seems to me that praising God in everything *does* get us a lot of the good stuff here—it's an indispensible part of fighting the fight of faith. But my friend who asked God how to overcome his misery and was told to "chill out" actually never praised God. He just asked God for direction and, in that interaction, he received simple direction which was backed by God's supernatural power. As Fuller finds his "happy heart in God" by reading and believing the Bible's promises, he's doing more than just praising God. As we obey the steps, the "prescriptions," that God is directing us towards, we're *doing* things that go beyond just praising God. And there are many more things that could be said. So praising God in all circumstances is truly central, but it's not the whole story.

Some final thoughts and ongoing questions

God is a good doctor whose prescriptions we'd be advised to take for our own good health. He's not a boss we owe work to as we work off our debt. All people *actually* need what Jesus has to offer—it's not an issue of anyone needing to change their *minds* in hope of going to heaven someday, as true as that may be—which provides a wonderful entrée into each person's life. Day-to-day trusting God's good heart towards us and believing that he will show us "the way we should walk" *is* the good life we are trying to experience ourselves and trying to help all other people experience. Finding our way into this story is finding our way into God's own mission on earth.

These and the other perspectives I've detailed here have proven profoundly helpful both in my life and the lives of many of my friends, and have also suggested an approach to ministry which many secular and secular-friendly people have found disarming and reorienting. (I had multiple people snag me just today to tell me their story of leaving secularism for faith in Jesus based on hearing these things from us.)

Now there will be much more to say about any "centered set theology." I'd think, for starters, there would be much more to say about the role of the Holy Spirit. Classic concerns—most notably towards justice—could benefit from an integrated treatment in this framework.

Some friends have wondered if Fuller's world lacks enough appreciation for *common grace*—is God found in activities *apart from* Bible reading and prayer and evangelism? And do we pick up a sense of joy *from* reading Fuller (or, perhaps in a related issue, from reading one of Fuller's theological heroes, Jonathan Edwards) despite its theoretical importance? These and many more issues could well be limitations here.

Many readers have wanted more of a robust discussion about the *atonement*. Surely Jesus' death on the cross accomplished more than just giving us the ultimate evidence that God wants to forgive our sins? (Though I'm confident that Fuller would not feel well-understood with that description of his perspective on the atonement.)

Not to mention that there's a lot more to *The Unity of the Bible* itself than is reflected in these brief remarks. Fuller really does take on the task of demonstrating the essential unity of the entire Bible around these themes. But these are the central insights that have played themselves out in our community and a few others as we've tried to experience faith in a predominantly secular world, and have tried to invite our friends in this setting to join us in this faith experience. *Unity* has given us a grid to forge what's felt like a very relevant path in this setting, and a path in which there were few models apart from this.

I expect this précis to grow and be honed as many of us engage in conversations around these observations, hopefully after having read and pondered *Unity* on our own. A sometimes challenging but very rich feast awaits you as you wade into the deep and refreshing waters of Dan Fuller's thoughts.