A SOCINIAN AND CALVINIST COMPARED:
JOSEPH PRIESTLEY AND ANDREW FULLER ON THE PROPRIETY
OF PRAYER TO CHRIST

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On April 13, 1791, Andrew Fuller (1754–1815), the pastor of the
Particular Baptist congregation in Kettering, Northamptonshire, sat
down to write a letter to his close friend and fellow minister, John
Sutcliff (1752–1814), concerning the religious convictions of a mutual
friend, Robert Hall, Jr. (1764–1831). Hall, a preacher of great brilliance,
was of some concern to his friends at this point in time, for he
professed a binitarian view of the Godhead and maintained that the
Holy Spirit was merely a power or influence. His friends feared that
he might drift even further from trinitarian orthodoxy towards
Socinianism, which affirmed the unipersonality of God and denied
the deity of Christ. Fuller, however, informed Sutcliff that in a recent
conversation which he had had with Hall, the latter complained of
"the ignorance, cant, & bigotry of Socinians". As to abilities, Hall told
Fuller, "they have one great man amongst them, but the rest are in
general but so many mites in a great Cheshire cheese".1 That "one
great man" was none other than Joseph Priestley (1733–1804), for
whom Hall had undisguised admiration, though he vehemently
disapproved of Priestley's religious sentiments.2

1 Letter to John Sutcliff, April 13, 1791 (Regent's Park College, Oxford).
of the Rev. Robert Hall, eds. Olinthus Gregory and Joseph Belcher (New York:
Harper & Bros., 1854), III, 24–25]. In his Christianity Consistent with a Love of Freedom
(1791) [Works, II, 23], Hall states that "the religious tenets of Dr. Priestley appear
to me erroneous in the extreme; but I should be sorry to suffer any difference of
sentiment to diminish my sensibility to virtue or my admiration of genius.”
after the manner of Benjamin Franklin". And Michael R. Watts, in his recent study of the early history of British Nonconformity, dubs Joseph Priestley the “Leonardo da Vinci of Dissent”. The eldest child of Jonas Priestley (1700–1779), a weaver and cloth dresser, and Mary Swift (d. 1740), the only daughter of a Yorkshire farmer, Priestley had become proficient by his early twenties in physics, philosophy, and mathematics as well as a variety of modern and ancient Near Eastern languages. During the 1760s and 1770s his reputation as England’s foremost experimental scientist was established by his publication of a weighty history of electrical experimentation and his discovery of ten new gases, including oxygen, ammonia, and sulphur dioxide. Alongside this illustrious career as a scientist Priestley was also a prolific and profound theological author. In fact, he regarded his work as a theologian as his “original and proper province”, for which he had a “justifiable predilection” due to the “superior dignity and importance of theological studies to any other whatever”. This observation occurs in the preface to one of Priestley’s major scientific treatises, *Experiments and Observations on Different Kinds of Air (1774–1777)*, and certainly reveals Priestley’s priorities.

He had been raised in a strong Calvinistic environment, his parents being members of the Congregationalist chapel at Heckmondwike in the West Riding of Yorkshire. From an early age he was familiar with the *Westminster Catechism*, his mother and father taking great care to teach all of their children and servants its tenets. After the death of his mother in 1740, he was sent to live with a paternal aunt, Sarah Keighley (d. 1764), whom Priestley described as a “truly pious and excellent woman” and “truly Calvinistic in principle”. When he came

6 *Memoirs of Dr. Joseph Priestley*, p.11, 13. See ibid., p.19, where Priestley describes his aunt and all his relatives as "strict Calvinists".