

Church History (53): John Gill

Following the Great Awakening, most English denominations were infected by Socinianism. This was especially true of the General Baptists. "Only the English Particular Baptists remained unscathed by the theological apostasy. Much of the credit for this unswerving allegiance to the doctrines of Scripture, under God, must be attributed to John Gill, known affectionately as 'Dr. Voluminous'" (Nettles).¹

I. John Gill recognized

1. *His personal life.* "John Gill was born at Kettering, in Northamptonshire, on November 23, 1697. By twelve years of age, he had mastered the principal Latin classics and obtained admirable proficiency in Greek. As he had no opportunity for formal education beyond that age, Gill was thrown on his own resources and energy to complete his education during moments when he was not assisting his father in weaving. Logic, rhetoric, philosophy, and Hebrew bowed to his efforts" (Nettles).² Both of his parents were Christians, and his father a deacon in the local Baptist church. Gill's interest in books and study was common knowledge in his day. "He visited the bookseller's shop so often that it became a saying with the common people in the town, 'such a thing is as sure as John Gill is in the bookseller's shop'" (Rippon).³ Though converted at age twelve, Gill wasn't baptized until he was nineteen in 1716. "When he was about twelve years of age, the workings of his mind became more serious, settled, and effectual: and especially after hearing a sermon of Mr. William Wallis, on Genesis 3:9, *And the Lord God called unto Adam, and said unto him, Where art thou?* Hence he used to call Mr. Wallis, if any man, his spiritual father, who died soon after" (Rippon).⁴ The Lord's Day following his baptism, in 1716, at a prayer meeting held in a private house, he was asked to read and expound Isaiah chapter 53. "Those who were present estimated the service as a favorable specimen of the ministerial talents the Lord of Zion had conferred upon him; and he was encouraged to proceed in the exercise of his gifts. Accordingly, the next Lord's Day evening, at the same place, he delivered a discourse on 1 Corinthians 2:2, *for I determined not to know any thing among you, save Jesus Christ, and Him crucified.* It was a charming season to the godly people" (Rippon).⁵ Soon after this, Gill moved to another town, six or seven miles from Kettering, to study under the local minister. "Here he continued the year following, and contracted an acquaintance with a young lady, whose name was Elizabeth Negus, whom he married in 1718. His marriage with this excellent person he always considered as the principal thing for which God, in His providence, sent him to that place; for she proved affectionate, discreet, and careful; and, by her unremitting prudence, delivered him from all domestic responsibilities; so that he could, with leisure and greater ease of mind, pursue his studies, and devote himself to his ministerial work" (Rippon).⁶

"Elizabeth Gill crossed over Jordan in 1764 in her sixty-eighth year, seven years before her husband and after a very lengthy, painful illness. She had proved a faithful wife for forty-six years and Gill always counted her the greatest blessing God had given him" (Ella).⁷ "By this amiable woman he had many (12) children, all of whom died in their infancy, except three. Elizabeth, 'a most lovely and desirable child, for person, sense, and grace,' died May the 30th, 1738, in the thirteenth year of her age. Her funeral sermon was preached by her father, from 1 Thess. 4:13-14, and was printed, with a pleasing account of the parts of her experience. Mary, who was a member of her father's church, was married to

¹ Tom Nettles, *By His Grace and For His Glory*, 73

² Tom Nettles, *By His Grace and For His Glory*, 73-74

³ John Rippon, *Life and Writings of the Rev. John Gill*, 4

⁴ John Rippon, *Life and Writings of the Rev. John Gill*, 4

⁵ John Rippon, *Life and Writings of the Rev. John Gill*, 8

⁶ John Rippon, *Life and Writings of the Rev. John Gill*, 9-10

⁷ George Ella, *John Gill: And the Cause of God and Truth*, 236

Mr. George Keith, a bookseller, died in January, 1773. John was a goldsmith, departed this life, May 22, 1804, in the 78th year of his age. These children were a great happiness to their parents, and the family had always reason to be thankful to God for their domestic comfort, peace, and harmony" (Rippon).⁸ Gill died on October 14, 1771, at the age of 74. "His last labors among his dear people were the sermons he preached from the Song of Zachariah, Luke 1:78, *By the remission of their sins, through the tender mercy of our God*, was the last text he preached. The last words he was heard to speak were, 'O my Father, my Father!' His removal was deeply felt. It spread a solemn gloom over the church in which he had honorably presided more than fifty-one years" (Rippon).⁹ After his death a treatise entitled, *Dying Thoughts: Consisting of A Few Unfinished Hints, Written by Dr. Gill, a Little Before His Decease*. "Death is very terrible to nature, and to natural men. To Christless sinners, death is the king of terrors." And yet Gill understood that death could also be troubling to saints. "There are several things which may serve to reconcile men to death, though it is so disagreeable to nature: 1. Death is necessary to free us from sin and sorrow. 2. Death is no other to saints, than going to their Father's House, where there are mansions provided, and where they shall enjoy His presence forevermore. 3. Death is in order to be with Christ, which is infinitely preferable to being in this world, and where they shall be forever with Him and behold His glory. 4. Death is the time of the Lord's in-gathering of His people to Himself; then it is He comes into His garden, and gathers His lilies, and this and the other flower, to put into His bosom. 5. The death of the saints is precious in the sight of God, Ps.115:16, and if it is precious to Him, they should not shrink at it themselves."¹⁰

2. *His pastorate*. "In 1719, the church at Horsly-down, Southwark, near London, being deprived of their pastor by the death of Mr. Benjamin Stinton, (son-in-law to Benjamin Keach, and his successor in that office, as pastor of that church), some of the members, hearing of Mr. Gill, desired a friend of his to write to him, and invite him to give them a visit, and preach to them; which he did, in the months of April and May, the same year. About two months after, the church wrote to him, requesting his return to them in the month of August; which he complied with, and continued preaching to them, till about September: when they made a choice of him as their pastor, and called him, young as he was, to the exercise of that office; which, after taking some time for consideration, he accepted of" (Rippon).¹¹ "Sadly this call occasioned a church split and although Gill's supporters were the majority they moved out to a rented meeting house as their opponents had secured the lease of the meeting house in Goat Yard. By the middle of 1720 the rival group had ended their lease of the Goat Yard premises and Gill and his friends were able to return to their old home. At Goat Yard they continued until 1757 when they built a new meeting house in Carter Lane, still in Southwark, and there Gill ministered until shortly before his death in 1771" (Oliver).¹² "From the pulpit of that church, Gill developed a comprehensive and positive presentation of Christian doctrine and established himself as a model of biblical exegesis and Bible-centered systematic theology. In addition, these disciplines led him to a consistent engagement with polemics. Eighteenth-century England presented many such opportunities" (Nettles).¹³

As early as 1729, Gill's ability as a preacher and scholar was recognized outside his church. Men from several denominations approached him about a weekly lecture. "The ministry of Mr. Gill being acceptable not only to his own people, but likewise to many in other churches, and of other denominations; some gentlemen moved among themselves to set up a lecture on some day in the week, that they might have the opportunity of hearing him. Thus, every Wednesday, from 1729-1756, Gill preached a

⁸ John Rippon, *Life and Writings of the Rev. John Gill*, 10-11

⁹ John Rippon, *Life and Writings of the Rev. John Gill*, 132-135

¹⁰ John Gill, *Sermons and Tracts*, 6:235-236

¹¹ John Rippon, *Life and Writings of the Rev. John Gill*, 11

¹² Robert Oliver, *The British Particular Baptists*, 1:147

¹³ Tom Nettles, *The Baptists*, 1:197-198

weekly lecture until he gave it up, by reason of age and multiplicity of work upon his hands" (Rippon).¹⁴ Many of these lectures were printed, and some formed the basis for larger treatises. Gill himself gave the reason for ending the weekly lecture: "I take my leave of this lecture, not through any dislike of the work I have been so long engaged in; nor through any disgust at any thing I have met with; nor through any discouragement for want of attendance; I have nothing to complain of; the lecture was never in better circumstances than it now is. But I find my natural strength will not admit me to preach so frequently, and with so much constancy, as I have done, for many years past; being now on the decline of life, in the fortieth year of my ministry; so that it is time for me to have done with extra service, I mean, service out of the church of which I am pastor."¹⁵

As Gill was growing weaker, a group of members, and two deacons, wrote a letter to him suggesting he find a "co-pastor to assist him as a son would his father." Gill responded on April 29, 1771 (7 months before his death): "Dear brethren, When I consider my advanced age, and the growing infirmities of it, which render me incapable of performing the duties of my office, as they ought to be performed...when, I say, I consider those things, I judge it most eligible, with your leave to resign my office as pastor of the Church and then you will be at full liberty to chose another who may have greater strength of body and more vigor of mind to exercise it."¹⁶ He ended the letter: "There my dear friends, are my best wishes for you, who for the present am, but not long expected to be your Pastor, Elder and Overseer."¹⁷ "This letter caused alarm amongst the members, the great bulk of whom could not imagine being separated from their beloved pastor. They told the deacons that they could not 'entertain the least thought' of Gill resigning and stressed that they wanted him to 'continue being pastor of this church till the Lord shall remove him to the Kingdom of Glory above'" (Ella).¹⁸ On behalf of the church, the deacons wrote the following letter to Gill on May 5. "Dear Sir, permit us to tell you how deeply we are affected at your letter, that we apprehend, you have mistaken the true meaning of ours of the 1st April. It appearing that you understand us, as desiring to have a co-pastor with you, whereas we did not point out any thing as our desire, either co-pastor or assistant, but only to crave your advice and a assistance, in that which might be most likely to terminate in the glory of God and your comfort. Being desirous to prefer your judgment in that matter to our own. We greatly fear that you apprehend an abatement in our affection and love towards you, that we are not conscious of, we think it impossible that our love should be easily removed from him who has instrumentally been made so useful to our souls, but we trust our hearts are knit as the hearts of one man towards you, as the servant of Christ, and as our father in the gospel of our Lord Jesus."¹⁹

Another grieving circumstance is, that if the church is willing, you seem inclined to resign your office as our pastor. This impression is extremely alarming to us, and is what can by no means find a place in our thoughts, it being our fixed desire, and continual prayer, that you may live and die in that endeared relation; we say with united voice, how can a father give up his children, or affectionate children their father? Dear sir, we beseech you to think and look upon us as your children, either begotten again unto the gospel of Christ, through your instrumentality, or built up in the faith of that gospel. We desire to say and testify, that in this sense you are our father, and we beseech you not to cast us off, but bear us upon your heart, and spiritual affections all your days and let us be recommended to God through your prayers, with a who knows, but the

¹⁴ John Rippon, *Life and Writings of the Rev. John Gill*, 27

¹⁵ John Rippon, *Life and Writings of the Rev. John Gill*, 72

¹⁶ George Ella, *John Gill: And the Cause of God and Truth*, 240

¹⁷ George Ella, *John Gill: And the Cause of God and Truth*, 241

¹⁸ George Ella, *John Gill: And the Cause of God and Truth*, 241

¹⁹ George Ella, *John Gill: And the Cause of God and Truth*, 241-242

Lord may visit us again with the Light of His Countenance, and make us to break forth, on the right hand and on the left, to the glory of divine grace, to the comfort and joy on your soul, and the refreshing and rejoicing the hearts of many. This we trust is the fervent prayer of every one of us.²⁰

3. *His writings.* Besides publishing a number of sermons and tracts (treatises), Gill published both *An Exposition of the Old and New Testament Scriptures*, and *A Body of Doctrinal and Practical Divinity*. Charles Spurgeon said of Gill's Exposition: "In some respects, he has no superior. For good, sound, massive, sober sense in commenting who can excel Gill?" His *Divinity*, published in 1769-1779, was the first Baptist Systematic theology ever written. "John Gill can be claimed to be the first and greatest Baptist who stood in the traditions of the Reformers and Puritans to work out a definite systematic theology for his own church and the Baptist movement as a whole" (Ella).²¹ Gill wrote in his introduction to his *Divinity*: "Having completed an Exposition of the whole Bible, the Books both of the Old and of the New Testament; I considered with myself what would be best next to engage in for the further instruction of the people under my care; and my thoughts led me to enter upon a Scheme of Doctrinal and Practical Divinity, first the former and then the latter; the one being the foundation of the other, and both having a close connection with each other."²² With regards to his tracts or treatises, Gill addressed most of these toward present-day errors. "Throughout his entire Christian life, Gill was called upon from within and without his denomination to break a lance for the evangelical faith and combat heresy wherever it raised its ugly head. Gill was, of course, singularly fitted out for such a task because of his dedication in working for the Lord and because of his scholarly attributes. Such a man as Gill was a real necessity for his day" (Ella).²³

(1) Antinomianism. This refers to the view that rejects the Ten Commandments remain as a rule of living for NC Christians. On March 22, 1739, he preached a public sermon from Romans 3:31 ('Do we then make void the law through faith? God forbid; yea, we establish the law'), entitled, *The Law Established by The Gospel*. He said: "By *the law*, I apprehend, we are to understand not the ceremonial law...but by *the law*, I judge, the moral law is intended; that law which was written in Adam's heart in innocence; some remains of which are to be observed in fallen man, and even among the Gentiles, destitute of a divine revelation; and because of the depravity of human nature, and the treachery of human memory, and because this law was so much obliterated, and almost erased out of the hearts of men; a new edition of it was delivered to Moses in writing, calculated particularly for the people of the Jews; and which is opposed unto, and contradistinguished from the gospel of Christ. The sum of this law is love to God and to our neighbor."²⁴ Gill then provided five uses of the law for Christians:²⁵ "One use of the law is, to inform us of the mind and will of God; it is a transcript of His holy nature and unchangeable will; and therefore is itself *holy just and good*; as it must needs be, since it comes from Him." "Another use of the law is, to convince of sin: *for by the law is the knowledge of sin*; of sin original and actual, of the sin of our hearts and nature, as well as of the sin of our lips, lives, and actions." "Again; another use of the law, is to be as a glass to believers themselves; to behold therein by the light of the divine Spirit, the deformity of their souls by sin, and the imperfection of their obedience; whereby they grow out of love with themselves, and quit all dependence on their own righteousness for justification." "There is a farther use of the law to believers, and that is, to make the righteousness of Christ more dear and valuable to them: for when they see how imperfect their own

²⁰ George Ella, *John Gill: And the Cause of God and Truth*, 242

²¹ George Ella, *John Gill: And the Cause of God and Truth*, 112

²² John Gill, *Body of Divinity*, xxiii

²³ George Ella, *John Gill: And the Cause of God and Truth*, 102-103

²⁴ John Gill, *Sermons and Tracts*, 2:51-52

²⁵ John Gill, *Sermons and Tracts*, 2:57-59

righteousness is, and how far short of the demands of the righteous law of God their obedience comes; and when they behold what an everlasting righteousness Christ has brought in; how perfect it is in itself, and how agreeable to the law; insomuch that it is not only fulfilled by it, but magnified and made honorable." "One more; another use and office of the law is, that it is a rule of life, that is, of action, walk and conversation to the saints; who are *not without law to God, but under the law to Christ*: and as it in the hands of Christ, and held forth by Him, as King of saints, and lawgiver in His church, it is to be observed and attended to by them."

(2) Paedobaptism. "In 1727 and 1728 Gill published two treatises defending baptism by immersion. These were *The Ancient Mode of Baptism by Immersion* and *A Defense of the Ancient Mode of Baptism by Immersion*. Both were written in response to two anonymous attacks on the Baptist position" (Oliver).²⁶ In 1765, two treatises affirming Paedobaptism was published in England: *A Defense of the Divine Rite of Infant Baptism*, and *A Fair and Rational Vindication of the Right of Infants to the Ordinance of Baptism*. Gill responded with, *The Divine Right of Infant Baptism Examined and Disproved* (1765), *Infant Baptism a Part and Pillar of Popery* (1766), and a sermon entitled, *Baptism a Divine Commandment to be Observed* (1765).

The Paedobaptists are ever restless and uneasy, endeavoring to maintain and support, if possible, their unscriptural practice of infant-baptism; though it is no other than a pillar of popery; that by which Antichrist has spread his baneful influence over many nations; is the basis of national churches and worldly establishments; that which unites the church and world, and keeps them together; nor can there be a full separation of the one from the other, nor a thorough reformation in religion; until it is wholly removed: and though it has so long and largely obtained, and still does obtain; I believe with a firm and unshaken faith, that the time is hastening on, when infant-baptism will be no more practiced in the world; when churches will be formed on the same plan they were in the times of the apostles; when gospel-doctrine and discipline will be restored to their primitive luster and purity; when the ordinances of baptism and the Lord's Supper will be administered as they were first delivered, clear of all present corruption and superstition; all which will be accomplished, when "The Lord shall be king over all the earth, and there shall be one Lord and His name one."²⁷

(3) Arminianism. Gill wrote much in defense of the doctrines of free and sovereign grace. The lengthiest of these defenses was published in four parts, in 1735, 1736, 1737 and 1738, against Dr. Whitby's *Discourse on the Five Points*. The first two parts addresses various Biblical texts used by Whitby, the third part was "a confutation of the arguments from reason by the Arminians," and the last part was an examination of early church fathers (prior to Augustine), showing their beliefs were consistent with sovereign grace. In 1752, Gill wrote a treatise against John Wesley entitled, *The Doctrine of the Saints Final Perseverance, Asserted and Vindicated*. This was in response to Wesley's, *Serious Thoughts on the Perseverance of the Saints*. "The doctrine of the saints final perseverance in grace to glory, being a doctrine so fully expressed in the sacred scriptures, so clearly wrote there as with a sun-bean...It may seem strange, that any man believing divine revelation, and professing godliness, should set himself to oppose it, and call such an opposition *Serious Thoughts* upon it, as a late writer has done; who has published a pamphlet under such a title, and which now lies before me, and which I have undertook to answer" (Gill).²⁸ A year later, Wesley authored *Predestination Calmly Considered*. Gill responded with *The Doctrine of Predestination Stated, and Set in The Scripture Light: In Opposition to Mr. Wesley's*

²⁶ Robert Oliver, *The British Particular Baptists*, 1:151

²⁷ John Gill, *Infant Baptism: A Part and Pillar of Popery*, 3-4

²⁸ John Gill, *Sermons and Tracts*, 5:63

Predestination Calmly Considered. "Mr. Wesley having declared himself the author of the *Serious Thoughts upon the Perseverance of the Saints*, to which I lately returned an answer; has been pleased to shift the controversy from *perseverance* to *predestination*: contenting himself with some low, mean and impertinent exceptions to a *part* of what I have written on the subject of perseverance: not attempting to answer any one argument advanced by me in vindication of it; and yet he has the assurance in the public papers, to call this miserable piece of his, chiefly written on another subject, *A Full Answer to Dr. Gill's Pamphlet on Perseverance*: any other man but Mr. Wesley would, upon reflection, be covered with shame and confusion; though to give him his due, in his great modesty, he has left out the word *Full* in some after-papers; as being conscious to himself, or it may be, some of his friends pointed it to him, that it was an imposition on the public, and tended greatly to expose himself and his cause; since he has left me in the full possession of all my arguments; which I will not say are unanswerable, though I think they are; and it looks as if Mr. Wesley thought so too, seeing he has not attempted to answer one of them" (Gill).²⁹

(4) Liberalism. In response to theological liberalism, Gill wrote such treatises as *The Doctrine of the Trinity* (1731), *The Doctrine of the Resurrection, Stated and Defended* (1750), and *A Dissertation Concerning the Eternal Sonship of Christ; Shewing by Whom it has Been Denied and Opposed, and by Whom Asserted and Defended in All Ages of Christianity* (1767). He began his treatise on the *Trinity* by saying: "The Doctrine of a Trinity of persons in the unity of the divine essence is, without controversy, a great mystery of godliness. It is a doctrine of pure revelation. That there is a God, and that there is but one God, who is a Being possessed of all divine perfections, may be known by the light of nature: But that there is a Trinity of persons in the Godhead, who are distinct, though not divided from each other, is what natural reason could never have discovered."³⁰ The treatise is divided into four parts: "I shall endeavor to prove four things. First, to prove the unity of the divine essence, or that there is but one God. Second, that there is a plurality in the Godhead. Third, that this plurality is neither more nor fewer than three, which three are the Father, the Word, and the Holy Ghost. And fourth, I shall consider the several characters, the proper Deity, and distinct personality of each of these three."³¹ Forty years later, in writing his *Body of Divinity*, Gill said he largely incorporated his earlier treatise on the *Trinity* into the *Body* with little or no alteration. "My treatise on the Trinity was written near forty years ago, and when I was a young man. And had I now departed from some words and phrases, I then used, it need not, after such a distance of time, be wondered at. But so far from it, that upon a late revival of the piece, I see no reason to retract any thing I have written, either as to sense or expressions."³²

(5) Deism. "Deism was a form of religious rationalism which appealed to the sophisticated at this time. The Deists denied special revelation and the doctrine of providence. They believed in a Creator who had brought the world into being and then left it to its own devices. Gill entered the lists against Anthony Collins (1676-1729), one of their prominent writers" (Oliver).³³ Among other things, Deists denied verbal inspiration and the supernatural. In 1728, Gill published his lengthy treatise, *The Prophecies of the Old Testament Respecting the Messiah, Considered and Proved to be Literally Fulfilled in Jesus*. Gill began by saying: "The design of the following sheets is to consider the prophecies of the Old Testament, respecting the Messiah; and to prove that they are literally fulfilled in Jesus, against both Jews and Deists."³⁴

²⁹ John Gill, *Sermons and Tracts*, 5:101

³⁰ John Gill, *The Doctrine of the Trinity*, 2-3

³¹ John Gill, *The Doctrine of the Trinity*, 4-5

³² John Rippon, *Life and Writings of the Rev. John Gill*, 37

³³ Robert Oliver, *The British Particular Baptists*, 1:151-152

³⁴ John Gill, *Sermons and Tracts*, 5:133