

Biography Of John Gill

English Baptist theologian (1697-1771)



Dr. John Gill stands as one of the most important and yet misunderstood of our Baptist forefathers. His spirituality and intellect were only matched by the intensity with which others loved him or reviled him. Tom Nettles says of Gill, "He has doubtless been judged more harshly and even maliciously than any man of comparable repute in Baptist history." How could one man demand such respect and at the same time engender such hard feelings?

Before that question can be answered we must consider Gill's heritage and life. Mr. Edward Gill, John's father, first became a member of a dissenting congregation in Kettering consisting then of Presbyterians, Independents, and Baptists. After a time the Baptists of the congregation were led by William Wallace to form a Particular Baptist church. It was into this strong heritage of evangelical Christianity that John Gill was born on November 23, 1697. Like most children of dissenters, John was sent to the grammar school in the town. His adeptness at learning soon set him apart from the other children. John continued his education with merit until he was eleven, mastering the Latin classics and learning Greek. At that time, due to doctrinal and practical differences, the dissenting parents of Gill's town withdrew their children from the local school. Those who could afford it sent their children off to schools elsewhere. Unfortunately, Gill's parents could not. In spite of this hindrance, the young scholar continued to study everything from logic to Hebrew.

His love for Hebrew would follow Gill throughout his life. When Mr. Gill settled in London in 1719, he became intimately acquainted with Mr. John Skepp. He was a self-taught Hebrew scholar with quite a large library of Hebrew books and Rabbinical writings. When Skepp died a few years later, Gill purchased most of his Hebrew and Rabbinical books. The young scholar recognized before many others that the New Testament was written by men who were Jews. He saw that in understanding the Hebrew mind set one could better understand the gospels. Gill soon became a Hebrew scholar without equal in his day. William Cathcart said: "It is within bounds to say that no man in the eighteenth century was so well versed in the literature and customs of the ancient Jews as John Gill. He has sometimes been called the Doctor John Lightfoot of the Baptists."

Around the time he was 12, Gill heard a sermon from his pastor, William Wallis, on the text, "And the Lord called unto Adam, and said unto him, where

art thou?" (Genesis 3:9). Those words of God searching for a sinner's heart stayed with Gill and eventually led to his conversion. It was not until seven years later that young John made a public profession when he was almost nineteen years of age.

His first pastoral work was as an intern in the village of Higham Ferrers. There he met and married Elizabeth Megus in 1718. As was still quite common in their day, several of their children died in infancy and another died at the age of thirteen. However, God smiled on John and Elizabeth and blessed them with two surviving children. Elizabeth would be his most trusted friend and love for 46 years of marriage.

Not long after marrying, the Gills went to their first place of ministry. As a matter of fact, the Horsleydown church in London would prove to be the only church in which John Gill ministered. On March 22, 1720 following another great Baptist, Benjamin Keach, Gill began his fruitful pastorate at Horesleydown. His pastorate lasted 51 years, passing on a great legacy to another Baptist who would follow him at the church a few years later, Charles Spurgeon.

From the beginning, Gill's preaching was both expositional and practical. He set the standard for the modern day practice of preaching through the Bible. At the age of 26 he began a series on the Song of Solomon which lasted 122 sermons. This would be his practice throughout his ministry. Like the Puritans, Gill saw preaching as a surgery of the soul in which the pastor was the physician and the church members were the patients. There was no room in his preaching for fluff. **Christian living was serious business which required serious instruction. We could learn much in our day from this. Pastors are not preparing children to go to the playground but rather they are outfitting soldiers of Christ to head off into war.**

One can not begin to understand a man like Gill without first comparing the general attitude of the modern church and that of men like Gill in his day. In our day it has become quite fashionable to believe as little as possible. Phrases like "we love Jesus in our church, not doctrine" are common. It is now seen as judgmental to correct anyone for error. H. Richard Niebuhr once described the modern gospel as consisting of a "God without wrath bringing people without sin into a kingdom without judgment through a Christ without a cross." As David Wells has so aptly entitled his book, in our day there is **No Place for Truth.**

The time of John Gill was far different. Search for knowledge was just reaching its full height after the world had crawled out of the Dark and Middle Ages. Everyone was writing and Gill was no exception. Early in his pastorate he published his first and perhaps his most important book. Between 1735 and 1738 *The Cause of God and Truth* appeared from Gill's pen and was a masterpiece in presenting the truth of God's sovereignty and man's depravity. Augustus Toplady was so moved by this work that he later called Gill the greatest defender of the doctrines of grace since Augustine.

Many more works followed in the years to come. In 1752, Gill published his pamphlet on The Doctrine of the Saints' Final Perseverance, in answer to one called Serious Thoughts upon the Perseverance of the Saints written by Mr. John Wesley. In 1769, he published A Body of Doctrinal Divinity in two volumes. This work contained the substance of what he delivered from the pulpit to the people under his care through the space of more than five years. There are but few, if any, theological publications in the English language of more deserved repute than these 1091 pages. Here is the Doctor's whole creed. Here his very heart appears; while he states, maintains, and defends, the Truth as it is in Jesus. Body of Divinity was followed in 1770 by A Body of Practical Divinity which covered such subjects as church membership, baptism, and the Lord's Supper.

There is a price to pay for notoriety. One can not be published as widely as was Gill and not escape criticism. As noted earlier, Tom Nettles says of Gill, "He has doubtless been judged more harshly and even maliciously than any man of comparable repute in Baptist history." Many have called John Gill a hyper-Calvinist who denied the need to preach the gospel to the lost. I will not seek to answer that question in this forum. Read Tom Nettles By His Grace and For His Glory, pages 73-107, for a thorough and balanced discussion of this issue.

The truth is that Gill foresaw the disastrous effects of Arminianism and Unitarianism and sought to protect God's people from them. Timothy George notes: "If Gill erred in overstressing God's initiative in salvation, it was because he believed the foundational fact was being undermined by the inroads of deism, rationalism, and the misdirected message of Arminianism." In spite of any criticisms which may justly or unjustly be applied to Dr. Gill, he was a staunch defender of the orthodox faith. He wrote extensively against those who denied the Trinity and rightly saw the growing influence and danger of Unitarianism. The historian Carl L. Becker said that Gill lived in a time when "God was on trial." On every side the Enlightenment was devaluing God and elevating man. To read Gill without recognizing the dangers he saw facing evangelical Christianity is a sad mistake and a disservice to that great man of God.

In the years after Dr. Gill's death there arose a great controversy between the followers of Gill and the followers of Andrew Fuller. Neither man would have endorsed such. There is no doubt that Fuller called Baptists to a more balanced presentation of the doctrines of Grace. But Gill also foresaw the disastrous slide of General (Arminian) Baptists into denials of the Trinity and of gospel redemption. Did Gill fail to preach the gospel to sinners as some have asserted? Why not from his own mouth and heart:

"Souls sensible to sin and danger, and who are crying out, What shall we do to be saved? you are to observe, and point out Christ the tree to live to them; and say, as some of the cherubs did to one in such circumstances, Believe on the Lord Jesus Christ and thou shalt be saved, Acts 16:31. Your

work is to lead men, under a sense of sin and guilt, to the blood of Christ, shed for many for the remission of sin, and this name you are to preach the forgiveness to them."

All things considered it seems Timothy George is right when he points out that much of the problem with Gill came from his followers that carried his teachings to extremes which he himself never advocated. Is this not the case in all generations? Beza overstated Calvin as Finney overstated Wesley. Like Paul, I believe Gill would have said, "some of you are of Gill, some of Fuller, some of Christ." Better to learn from his strengths than to pick apart his perceived weaknesses!

After pastoring the same church for 51 years, John Gill left this earth on October 14, 1771, just five years before the American Revolution. He had ministered during a rich time of history. His contemporaries were Wesley and Whitefield. It is fitting that Gill's remains were buried with such great dissenters as John Owen and John Bunyan. One member of Gill's church wrote a hymn about Gill at his death. The last verse says:

Zion may mourn, for grief becomes her well.
To lose the man whose Heaven instructed pen
Taught knowledge clearly, while before him fell
Gigantic errors of deluded men.

To say that Dr. Gill influenced evangelical Christians in general and Baptists in particular is like saying the sun influences the daytime. He was the first Baptist to write a complete systematic theology and the first to write a verse-by-verse commentary of the entire Bible. Gill wrote so much that he was known as Dr. Voluminous. Tom Nettles writes. "His loss was felt keenly by the whole denomination of Baptists, a group still small and despised ... His outstanding scholarship, zeal for truth and pious polemics had greatly encouraged Baptists ..."

Dr. Gill's life and work stand as a warning to the modern church. Ignore doctrine and truth and you will soon find yourself an empty shell with no life inside. Gill needed the correction of Fuller. There is no doubt that his followers so emphasized God's sovereignty that they forsook evangelism and missions. Spurgeon rightly saw that as a travesty to the Gospel of Jesus Christ. At the same time, Gill's powerful presentation of the God with Whom we have to do is needed in every generation.

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