

John Gill and His Successors



The witness and teaching of Dr John Gill (1697-1771) so impressed his friends Augustus Toplady and James Hervey that they maintained his work would still be of great importance to future generations. This also became the conviction of John Rippon (1750-1836) and Charles Haddon Spurgeon (1834-1892), Gill's more well-known successors to his pastorate, but it was also the testimony of those who served for shorter periods at Carter Lane such as John Martin, Benjamin Francis and John Fawcett. The witness of these faithful men of God has helped point generations to Gill's works which have subsequently enriched their lives.

The present evangelical establishment is apparently striving to unite Calvinism with Arminianism, Baxterism and worse in an effort to promote an ecumenical doctrinal mish-mash which will suit all sides. Symptomatic of this is the new fashion of stressing the universality of the atonement, the belief that Christ died in vain for certain lost sinners, the myth that the covenant of works has been annulled for sinners, a rejection of preaching the law as a preparation for the work of grace and the idea that salvation comes through repentance and faith as human agencies in regeneration. This is all backed up by the nonsensical theory that the Father and Son represent paradoxical modes in the unity of the Godhead. Such a deviation from the witness of the Bible has resulted in the clear teaching of Particular Baptist John Gill being rejected for the syncretism of Andrew Fuller who succeeded in combining Arminianism, Baxterism, Latitudinarianism and Socinianism and presenting it as *The Gospel Worthy of All Acceptation*.

A by-product of this U-turn in modern evangelical thinking is a critical reassessment of the writings of John Gill and a re-interpretation of the works of those who have referred to them in an apparently positive way in the past. Typical of such revisionism, and following on a series of similar reconstructions concerning the life and writings of William Huntington, is the article entitled John Gill and C. H. Spurgeon in Issue 386 of the Banner of Truth magazine authored by the Rev. Iain Murray. In this essay, an ominous foretaste of a larger work on Hyper-Calvinism to follow, Iain Murray suggests that Spurgeon is 'over generous to Gill' and that Rippon is too 'peace-loving' and 'moderate' in his references to Gill's doctrine. In other words, we are now to believe that these men have presented their readers with a too positive picture of their subject. Obviously Mr. Murray neither shares the peace-loving approach of Gill's successors, nor their moderation in accessing Gill's views. Thus, in order to demonstrate his general antipathy to Gill's doctrines, though admiring his learning and character, Mr. Murray has developed methods of producing evidence which are truly immoderate and highly controversial. He quotes, for instance, a general criticism of 18th century Particular Baptists which Spurgeon did not write and deduces from this sparse information that Spurgeon not only shared the criticism but applied it specifically to Gill. All without the least display of evidence! Murray then gives actual words of

Spurgeon in criticism of Gill's imitators, to imply that they also refer to Gill himself, though, in the context, Spurgeon does not maintain this position. Turning to Gill's work *The Cause of God and Truth* which is a treatise against the anti-Calvinistic teaching of Arminian-Arian Dr Daniel Whitby (1638-1726) and a rejection of the universal atonement theory, Mr. Murray picks out the words 'coming to him, or believing in him to the saving of their souls,' and 'without the special grace of God', which convey little meaning as they stand, and, without giving their context, fits them into an argument of his own making to 'prove' that Gill did not believe in human responsibility. The whole reconstruction is presented as Gill's express argument, even though moderate Rippon argues at length from this very book to prove beyond any shadow of a doubt that Gill emphasised human responsibility. Mr Murray's method is reminiscent of the mock-scientific work of the palaeontologists who discover part of a tooth and reconstruct a skeleton from it, claiming that it is the real thing.

Judging by the fractions of quotes Mr. Murray gives, he appears to be referring to Gill's exposition of John 5:40 where Christ says, "And ye will not come to me, that ye might have life." This is a decisive text in separating false Calvinists of the Fullerite school from the genuine Reformed Faith as Gill argued that the words must be taken literally, whereas Fuller argued that its doctrine, as that of sin, the atonement, imputed righteousness, satisfaction and substitution were to be understood figuratively according to what he termed 'the nature and fitness of things .' Andrew Fuller, however, on viewing this text, admitted that Gill clearly taught human responsibility in expounding it ! In all matters, it will be found that Fuller is fairer than his modern Hyper-Fullerite imitators.

When Gill takes up this text in Part I, Section XXX of *The Cause of God and Truth*, he is arguing completely contrary to the way Mr. Murray presents his views. Furthermore, John Rippon's account of Gill's teaching on the subject is taken verbatim from this passage and in no way implies an up-valuing of it. After explaining the disabilities that sinners lie under in not coming to Christ, Rippon quotes Gill correctly as saying, "Though man lies under such a disability and has neither power nor will of himself to come to Christ for life; yet his not coming to Christ, when revealed in the external ministry of the Gospel, as God's way of salvation, is criminal and blameworthy; since the disability and perverseness of his will are not owing to any decree of God, but to the corruption and vitiosity of his nature through sin. And therefore, since this vitiosity of nature is blameworthy, that which follows upon it, and is the effect of it must be so too ." How Mr. Murray can possibly interpret this central doctrine of Gill's which he anchored in the 1729 Declaration of Faith as being the very opposite of what Gill actually affirmed shows either acute negative prejudice or a total neglect of sources.

Mr Murray produces a red herring in his references to the 1689 Particular Baptist Declaration of Faith. He infers that Rippon's 1790 reprint implies a rejection of Gill's (and Rippon's church's) 1729 statement of faith. He omits to add that Rippon reprinted Gill's confession in 1800! Rippon was a historian

and theologian of note and rescued many a worthy Particular Baptist document from oblivion. This does not mean that he rejected his own church's creed every time he printed another. Contrary to what Murray postulates, Rippon was still using Gill's declaration of faith in his own church well into the 19th century. Writing in 1800, Rippon states that his new members were only accepted into fellowship on giving their full assent to the 1729 declaration. Indeed, the 1729 Goat Yard confession of faith became the standard orthodox confession of many Particular Baptist churches for over a hundred years and it is still used almost verbatim by a good number of Baptist churches of various associations in Britain and the USA. Rippon stresses that Gill's Declaration is a positive testimony of how he united faith with practice. This statement by Rippon is of great importance in the face of modern Hyper-Fullerite criticism that Gill's theology taught passive rather than active faith. Rippon thus affirms, "few are the formulas which have at any time been more closely united with duty. The term and the thing are remarkable, in this confession - and no man was more fond of either in their proper place, and fairly understood."

Mr Murray gives the impression that the old Particular Baptist confessions contained articles on a universal offer of salvation. This would, of course, mean that they believed as Fuller later argued, that there is a universal offer of salvation based on a universally applicable atonement which warrants, i.e. guarantees, salvation to those who are prepared, in Fullerite terminology, to partake of the feast freely provided. Murray even states that Gill drew up his own declaration of faith in order to provide a creed without such a 'free offer' article. This is a great distortion of the facts. There are no such articles in the great 18th century Particular Baptist declarations of faith including the two major London confessions. In many ways, the Second London Confession is less Calvinistic than the 1644 version as it took into account the compromise between traditional Calvinists and Free Offer men which produced the Westminster Confession. However, the Second London Particular Baptist Confession of 1677, which followed the Westminster Confession closely, wisely altered Article X Of the Gospel, omitting the words "God . . . doth freely offer this salvation to all men in the gospel", and placing the term 'offer' under Chapter VII Of God's Covenant. Here salvation is offered within the covenant of grace with reference to "all those that are ordained unto eternal life." Chapter X thus became Of Effectual Calling. Of the Gospel is placed in Chapter 20 and refers to the revelation of the gospel to the elect and not to a general offer to all sinners.

Furthermore there are no such 'free offer' articles as Murray sees them even in the bulk of Arminian Baptist creeds, the Orthodox Creed of 1679 being no exception. Article IX Of *Predestination and Election*, speaks of predestination to life in the eternal purpose of God of those whom he elected in the mystical body of Christ before the foundations of the world and placed in an eternal covenant. In this creed, although the authors speak dangerously of the sinner's 'improving on common grace', there is no talk of a 'universal offer' as such. Article XXI speaks of a vocational and effectual calling, a distinction Gill himself makes in Part I, Article X of *The Cause of God and Truth* and in his

Doctrine of Predestination Stated and Set in the Scriptural Light which he wrote against Wesley's *Predestination Calmly Considered*. Gill shows here that the gospel must be preached to all as the Spirit leads but it comes as a savour of life unto life to some and a savour of death unto death to others. The former is the effectual call, outlined carefully in the old Baptist creeds, which is the 'powerful operation of the Spirit of God on the soul' which cannot be resisted and the latter is the external call by the ministry of the Word which puts a man under his obligations but 'may be resisted, rejected, and despised, and become useless.' This teaching echoes that of Calvin's in his *Institutes, Book III*, chapter 21 where he explains that it is God's good pleasure that the gospel does not come equally to all and receives the same reception and "it is plain how greatly ignorance of this principle detracts from the glory of God, and impairs true humility." Anyone taking care to compare the 1729 Goat Yard Declaration of faith with its forerunners, good as they are, will notice that the confession stresses the sinner's responsibility before God and Christian duties to uphold and spread the Faith. This causes Timothy George to argue convincingly that Spurgeon himself would have fully accepted Gill's confession. Until Mr. Murray produces solid evidence for his apparently prejudiced opinion to the contrary, this author will stick to Timothy George's opinion and the known facts.

In mentioning that the Puritan creeds included a free offer clause, Mr. Murray is no doubt thinking of the Council of Dort and the Westminster confession. These understood the free offer to mean Christ should be preached to all as the Spirit leads. The novelty which Alvery Jackson brought into Particular Baptist church history in 1752 and which influenced Fuller so much was to change the meaning of the free offer of grace to a universal offer of salvation wrought out in the teamwork of God's purpose and human agency. This is not a Puritan doctrine. It is not even an Arminian doctrine as, though it is based on a legal view of grace which would please many an Arminian, it also shows a disbelief in the total depravity of man, a doctrine which Arminian leaders such as Wesley held dear. As the 'free offer' is used to mean a universal atonement by the modern evangelical Establishment, it is best avoided, especially as it is not a Scriptural term. Mr. Murray shows on which side of the Puritans he stands by attaching a eulogy of Fuller to his denunciation of Gill. He also fails to see how much the Goat Yard confession was a product of the whole church membership. The church book states that it was the members who asked Gill to draw up the confession and Rippon tells us explicitly how 'cordially one' they were with their pastor.

Charles Haddon Spurgeon is glowing in his praise of Gill. Of his ordination, Spurgeon says, 'Little did the friends dream what sort of man they had thus chosen to be their teacher; but had they known it they would have rejoiced that a man of such vast erudition, such indefatigable industry, such sound judgement, and such sterling honesty, had come among them.' Spurgeon loved reading Gill's sermons and wrote, for instance in his copy of Gill's preaching on the Song of Solomon, "This priceless work of my learned predecessor has always been helpful to me." In his *Commenting and Commentaries*, he says of this work, "Those who despise it, have never read it,

or are incapable of elevated spiritual feelings." This sums up much of present day second-hand criticism of Gill which is rarely based on a first hand knowledge of his works. Gill's commentaries, which were merely his sermons in writing, were regularly and eagerly consulted by the Prince of Preachers who marked them all with three stars which was Spurgeon's way of saying, "The very best!". In 1886 he jotted in his copy of Ezekiel to Malachi the words, "Many sneer at Gill, but he is not to be dispensed with. In some respects, he has no superior. He is always well worth consulting." In a letter dated February 1855, Spurgeon pays tribute to Gill's influence on him by stating "My position, as Pastor of one of the most influential churches, enables me to make myself heard and my daily labour is to revive the old doctrines of Gill, Owen, Calvin, Augustine and Christ." It would seem here that Spurgeon was so taken up by the testimony of Gill that he mixed up his priorities and put Gill first and Christ last.

It is such utterances as Spurgeon's exuberant praise of Gill that have obviously coloured Mr. Murray's views of the scholar-pastor. So great was Gill's influence throughout the 18th and 19th centuries that thousands of would-be preachers aped him. This was rightly deplored by Gill's successors in his pastorate. This led John Fawcett, for instance, whilst considering a call to Carter Lane, to make his own position clear concerning the man he admired:

To be brief, my dear friends, you may say what you will,
I'll ne'er be confined to read nothing but Gill'.

If anyone can be viewed as a spiritual successor of John Gill, it must be J. C. Philpot who nevertheless wrote concerning his contemporaries' tendency to imitate great men:

"Unless a man comes nowadays with a Shibboleth, he is almost set aside as a man of truth. He must use certain words, whether Scripture or not, must preach in a prescribed manner, as well as with prescribed matter. He must not vary from a certain mould, and if he dares to use his own way of setting forth truth, in his own simple language, and as he simply feels and has felt, many can hardly tell whether he is right or wrong, and the majority perhaps set him down as wrong altogether. I dislike, amazingly, the artificial mode of setting forth truth by which, when you hear a text given out, you know all the divisions and mode of handling it before they are mentioned, and can tell the end of every sentence nearly as soon as you hear the beginning. It smells too strongly of Dr. Gill and premeditation to suit me, but some cannot eat the dish unless served up every day in a plate of the same pattern; and, like children, when a different shaped or different painted cup comes on the table, cannot drink, as being so occupied with the novelty. But God will bless His own truth and His own servants, and when He thrusts forth His own stewards, will not send them forth as apes and imitators either of Huntington, Gadsby, or Warburton. They shall have their own line of truth and their own method of setting it forth, and they shall be commended, sooner or

later, to spiritual consciences as men taught of Him .”

Such words, of course, ought never to be so construed that they are taken for a criticism of Gill himself. Elsewhere, Philpot says of the pastor who under God influenced his own denomination so much:

“For a sound, consistent, scriptural exposition of the word of God, no commentary, we believe, in any language can be compared with Dr. Gill’s. There may be commentaries on individual books of Scripture, such as Vitringa on Isaiah, Venema on the Psalms, Alting on Jeremiah, Caryllon Job, Lampe on John, Luther on the Galatians, Owen on the Hebrews, Mede on the Revelation, which may surpass Gr. Gill’s in depth of research and fullness of exposition; and the great work from which Poole compiled his Synopsis may be more suitable to scholars and divines, as bringing together into one focus all the learning of those eminent men who in the 16th century devoted days and nights to the study and interpretation of the word of God. But for English readers there is no commentary equal to Dr. Gill’s. His alone of all we have seen is based upon consistent, harmonious views of divine truth, without turning aside to the right hand or the left. It is said of the late Mr. Simeon, of Cambridge, that his plan of preaching was, if he had what is called an Arminian text, to preach from it Arminianism, and if he took a Calvinistic text, to preach from it Calvinism. Not so Dr. Gill. He knew nothing about Arminian texts, or Arminian interpretations. He believed that the Scriptures, as an inspired revelation from God, must be harmonious and consistent with itself, and that no two passages could so contradict each other as the doctrines of free-will contradict the doctrines of grace. The exhortation of the Apostle is, “Having then gifts differing according to the grace that is given to us whether prophecy, let us prophesy according to the proportion of faith.” (Rom. 12:6.) This apostolic rule was followed closely by Dr. Gill. “The proportion,” or as the word literally means, “analogy of faith,” was his rule and guide in interpreting the Scripture; and therefore, as all his explanations were modelled according to the beautiful proportions of divine truth as received by faith, so every view disproportionate to the same harmonious plan was rejected by him as God-dishonouring, inconsistent, and contradictory. It is this sound, consistent, harmonious interpretation of divine truth which has stamped a peculiar weight and value on Dr. Gill’s Commentary, such as no other exposition of the whole Scripture possesses .”

In a similar way to Philpot, Spurgeon warned continually against those who imitated Gill but he always emphasised that he did not include Gill in his criticism of those who claimed to be Gill’s followers. Thus Mr Murray is being unfair to both Spurgeon and Gill when he allows Spurgeon’s words concerning Gill’s imitators to cast a shadow over Gill himself. This kind of journalese spoilt Murray’s otherwise excellent book on *The Forgotten Spurgeon* and seems all set to damage his coming book on Spurgeon and Hyper-Calvinism. Murray’s own quotes from Spurgeon confute him, however, such as when he quotes Spurgeon as saying, “Gill is the Coryhaeus of Hyper-

Calvinism, but if his followers never went beyond their master, they would not go very far astray." Here in *Commentating and Commentaries*, Spurgeon is not criticising Gill's theology but his way of sermon construction and systematising doctrine. Here, again, Spurgeon refers to Gill's imitators but stresses that if they really stuck to Gill's teaching, "they would not go very far astray." Murray claims that this is 'over generous', but this is Spurgeon's honest opinion which obviously differs from Mr Murray's which is 'over-critical' and lacks objectivity.

A more serious misuse of sources is seen in Murray's references to Ivimey. He takes the Baptist historian's remarks about a few words said in private to a group of mourners after preaching on Job 30 and uses Ivimey's comments as if they were a general and absolute condemnation of Gill's preaching. Even if they were, this would not reflect negatively on Gill as Ivimey was to a certain extent, caught up in the Grotian-New Divinity theology propagated by Fuller which looked upon preaching the moral 'fitness of things' as that which distinguished the New Testament Church from the Old. This doctrine reduced Biblical theology to a matter of morals. Thus Gill's manly preaching to the whole man was not understood. In spite of this background, Ivimey is far more balanced than Murray and emphasises time and time again the great usefulness of Gill in the pulpit. Whilst writing of Gill's prowess as a preacher, he quotes John Rippon as saying that Gill, "came into the pulpit, at times, with an heavenly lustre on his countenance, in the fullness of the blessing of the gospel of Christ; enriched, and generally enriching." Ivimey's positive criticism of Gill is culled from Rippon but his negative criticism is taken from Crosby. It must be remembered that the latter was excommunicated from two different churches on matters of faith and practice and had a personal grievance against Gill which Gill's successors did not share.

Mr. Murray does not give due regard to the language of Ivimey which he quotes. Fullerite jargon is flooded with the language of Zion though it is drenched with a completely different sense content than traditional Biblical theology would permit. Fullerites, when using Biblical terms such as sin, unbelief, pardon, wrath and righteousness re-interpret these in accordance with their Grotian theology. This is made quite clear in Fuller's dialogues and letters against Button and Booth where he constantly redefines concrete terms to give them a figurative and highly speculative sense content more worthy of the Neo-Platonists than Peter and Paul. Thus Fullerites deny that orthodox men preach on the wrath of God because they themselves mean something quite different by it. If we take Ivimey's words, however, in their true Biblical semantic context, we find that Mr. Murray has really made a blunder in quoting them as evidence against Gill. All the points concerning the terrors of the Lord, actual reconciliation, warnings of doom and the wrath of God are very much evident in Gill's preaching. On the other hand, these, in their true sense, are conspicuous by their absence in the preaching of such wolves in sheep's clothing as Andrew Fuller and Robert Hall. They believe that all God's displays of wrath are amiable, that there is no actual reconciliation accomplished in the atonement and even Hell is a positive place as its inhabitants have plenty of time to constructively recollect over what

went wrong in their lives. In stark contrast to this, one only has to read Gill's sermons on the subjects Murray quotes to find much that will make the sinner shake and the redeemed praise God . Here modern criticism of Gill's preaching is truly unbalanced. For instance, Erroll Hulse in his Arminian-like work entitled *The Free Offer*, which leaves the vital parts of the gospel out, compares what he feels is Gill's worst exposition of one passage of Scripture with what he feels is the very best of Spurgeon on quite different texts. What can be gained from such selective evidence? Had he compared Gill with Spurgeon on the same texts, he would have been amazed to find with what care Gill led souls to Christ.

Finally a word must be said concerning Murray's claim that churches of Gill's Biblical persuasions died and Fuller's brand of so-called 'Evangelical Calvinism' flourished. Gill had about the largest Baptist churches in Britain for almost half a century. John Ryland Sen. increased his own Northampton church seven-fold. Hervey, Maddock's and Hawker's large (Anglican) churches were too small to hold the hundreds to a thousand that flocked in. This was at a time when the duty-faith, free-offer Modern Question theology was being preached by Jackson, Taylor and Stennett. The churches of these men never rivalled Gill's in any way. When Gill died, there was no rapid growth of Fullerite churches. In spite of the Northampton Baptist churches (i.e. those who came most under Fuller's influence) receiving many hundreds of new members after Hervey died and Maddock left the district, the churches in the central area of what Murray calls 'the Evangelical Revival on Nonconformist churches' averaged around 50 baptised adults. Seen on a wider basis, successful Particular Baptist preachers such as Ryland Sen., Rippon, Beddome, Kinghorn, Button and Booth refused to be tainted by Fuller's figurative interpretations of Scripture. Booth, indeed, said Fuller was lost. Many of these churches refused to accept Fuller's view of para-church missionary work and fund-raising. Fuller admitted in his old age that his cause was waning but that of the Evangelicals in the Church of England was growing . Meanwhile preachers of righteousness such as William Huntington were pastoring thousands. These were followed by such men as William Gadsby who founded some forty to fifty churches in a matter of no time and filled them with converts through his own ministry. They were treading in the footsteps of Richard Davis who evangelised the 80 miles radius around his Rothwell church and instructed some hundreds of evangelists to go out into the highways and byways in Christ's name. All these, according to modern Fullerites are Hyper-Calvinists who do not believe in preaching to sinners. How ridiculous can such criticism get?

Rather than reject Gill's teaching concerning the pastorate and practical divinity, Spurgeon testified regularly to having not only inherited Gill's pulpit but also his mantle. He and Rippon knew that Gill's value as a preacher was because those under his ministry knew he was a man who practised what he preached. His hearers trusted him with full and thankful hearts, knowing that his great aim was to lead his flock into green pastures and protect them from the snares and wolves of the world. Referring to the fact that all who knew him from his childhood on were deeply impressed by the sanctity of Gill's life,

Rippon says,

“Those who had the honour and happiness of being admitted into the number of his friends can go still further in their testimony. They know, that his moral demeanour was more than blameless: it was, from first to last, consistently exemplary. And, indeed, an undeviating consistency, both in his views of evangelical truths, and in his obedience, as a servant of God, was one of those qualities, by which his cast of character was eminently marked. He was, in every respect, a burning and a shining light - Burning with love to God, to Truth, and to Souls - Shining, as “an ensample to believers, in word, in faith, in purity; “a pattern of good works, and a model of all holy conversation and godliness .”

Almost 30 years after Gill died, John Rippon recorded that such were the number of remembrance sermons preached and published at his death that never before and never since had such a lamentation gone up in the English speaking world because a great man had fallen in Israel. Both Rippon and Spurgeon would have been deeply saddened if any contemporary of theirs, in a leading evangelical position, would have refused to join in this lamentation and bemoan the fact that such a saint was with them no more. They would have thought that such a refusal to honour Gill’s name and testimony was to dishonour the Gospel for which Gill stood. It was in conjunction with the down-grade controversy that Spurgeon affirmed he had taken up Gill’s mantle. He wished to be for his age what Gill had been in the century before. Mr. Murray has other wishes and he is respectfully entitled to them. He has no business, however, to besmirch the memory of a true saint and replace it with an artificial gospel based on a distortion of the truth. This is not preaching the gospel properly as Mr. Murray and his faithful band of followers pretend. It is the world, the flesh and the devil striving to prevent the growth of Christ’s Kingdom. All true evangelicals must rally around the real Standard as revealed in Scripture to demonstrate the artificiality of this Hyper-Fullerite faked and faded picture of the true ‘army with banners .’

- *George M. Ella, Muelheim*

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[John Gill’s Exposition Of The Bible at BibleStudyTools.com](#)

[John Gill’s Exposition of the Whole Bible at StudyLight.org](#)

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[A Vindication of John Gill](#)

[Summary of the Life, Writings & Character of John Gill](#)

[John Gill information at theopedia.com](#)

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[1729 Goat Yard Declaration of Faith, by John Gill for the church he was pastoring at the time](#)

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