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HYPER-CALVINISM AND THE THEOLOGY OF JOHN GILL

The story of how the English Baptist William Carey (1761–1834), a cobbler by training, became the learned father of the modern missionary movement is a well-known one to Baptists and has rightly become central to their thinking about the nature of Baptist identity.<sup>1</sup> One aspect of that story which has been used numerous times in missionary appeals and sermon illustrations has to do with a rebuke that Carey received not long after he had begun preaching.<sup>2</sup> The rebuke came from John Collett Ryland (1723–92), who was quite eccentric and was one of the most colourful characters of the eighteenth-century English Baptist community.<sup>3</sup> At a meeting of the pastors of the Northamptonshire Baptist Association on September 30, 1785, Ryland, who was one of the senior pastors of that body, asked Carey to propose a topic that they could discuss that day. Carey suggested a question that had been running through his mind for some time: “Whether the command given to the apostles to teach all nations was not binding on all succeeding ministers, to the end of the world, seeing that the accompanying promise was of equal extent.” Carey’s

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<sup>1</sup> On Carey’s life, the classic studies are those by his nephew and grandson: Eustace Carey, *Memoir of William Carey, D.D.* (London: Jackson and Walford, 1836) and S. Pearce Carey, *William Carey* (8<sup>th</sup> ed.; London: The Carey Press). Other important studies include George Smith, *The Life of William Carey: Shoemaker & Missionary* (London: J.M. Dent & Sons/New York: E.P. Dutton, 1909); Mary Drewery, *William Carey: Shoemaker and Missionary* (London: Hodder and Stoughton, 1978); Timothy George, *Faithful Witness: The Life and Mission of William Carey* (Birmingham, Alabama: New Hope, 1991); Keith Farrer, *William Carey: Missionary and Botanist* (Kew, Victoria, Australia: Carey Baptist Grammar School, 2005); John Appleby, *‘I Can Plod...’ William Carey and the early years of the first Baptist missionary Society* (London: Grace Publications Trust, 2007).

<sup>2</sup> For the details of the account that follows, see Michael A.G. Haykin, *One heart and one soul: John Sutcliff of Olney, his friends, and his times* (Darlington, Co. Durham: Evangelical Press, 1994), 193–6. See also the discussion of this event by Brian Stanley, *The History of the Baptist Missionary Society 1792-1992* (Edinburgh: T & T Clark, 1992), 6-7.

<sup>3</sup> John Newton (1725–1807) once described him as having “many particularities which gave him an originality of character” [cited Josiah Bull, *John Newton of Olney and St. Mary Woolnoth. An Autobiography and Narrative* (London: The Religious Tract Society, 1868), 205].

On Ryland, see William Newman, *Rylandiana: Reminiscences relating to the Rev. John Ryland, A. M. of Northampton* (London: George Wightman, 1835); James Culross, *The Three Rylands: A Hundred Years of Various Christian Service* (London: Elliot Stock, 1897), 9–66; Peter Naylor, “John Collett Ryland (1723–92)” in Michael A.G. Haykin, ed., *The British Particular Baptists, 1638-1910* (Springfield, Missouri: Particular Baptist Press, 1998), I, 185–201; Peter Naylor, *Calvinism, Communion and the Baptists: A Study of English Calvinistic Baptists from the Late 1600s to the Early 1800s* (Studies in Baptist History and Thought, vol.7; Carlisle, Cumbria/Waynesboro, Georgia: Paternoster press, 2003), 54–7; Robert W. Oliver, *History of the English Calvinistic Baptists 1771–1892: From John Gill to C.H. Spurgeon* (Edinburgh/Carlisle, Pennsylvania: The Banner of Truth Trust, 2006), 30–8. See also the sketch of Ryland’s character by William Jay, *The Autobiography of William Jay*, eds. George Redford and John Angell James (1854 ed.; repr. Edinburgh: The Banner of Truth Trust, 1974), 286–96.

question obviously grew out of meditation upon Matthew 28:18–20. If, Carey reasoned, Christ’s promise of his presence with his people is for all time (verse 20), what then of his command to “teach all nations” about Christ (verse 19a)? Was it not a requirement for the church till the end of history as we know it?

Nor would it have escaped Carey’s notice that this text was also a traditional passage Baptists had employed in their defence of believer’s baptism. For instance, in the middle of the seventeenth century, when the English Calvinistic Baptists were emerging from the matrix of Puritanism, Benjamin Coxe (1595–c.1664), Hanserd Knollys (1599–1691), and William Kiffin (1616–1701), three early Baptist leaders who were all based in London, could state:

The only written commission to baptize (which is in Matth. 28.19.) directeth us to baptize Disciples only, *Go ye and disciple all nations, baptizing them*; that is, the disciples: for this is the only construction and interpretation that the Greek word can there bear; and Infants cannot be made disciples, because they cannot learn.

...Then only is baptism administered according to the rule of the Word, when a disciple is baptized into the name of the Father, and of the Son, etc. Matth. 28.19, that is, into the profession of faith in the Father, Son, and holy Spirit;...this necessarily excludes infants, who can make no such profession.<sup>4</sup>

Only those who are disciples, that is, those who have heard the gospel, learned of Christ, and responded to it in faith and repentance, should be baptized. In other words, Carey was also implicitly asking: If this command to baptize only believers was of ongoing validity—and the English Baptist community in his day would have wholeheartedly answered this question in the affirmative— what then of the command to evangelize the nations?

According to another pastor who was actually present at this meeting of the Northamptonshire Association ministers, John Webster Morris (1763–1836), then pastor of Clipston Baptist Church in Northamptonshire, Ryland responded with some vehemence to Carey’s suggestion and bluntly told the young pastor:

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<sup>4</sup> *A Declaration Concerning the Publike Dispute...Concerning Infants-Baptisme* (London, 1645), 19, 20. Spelling and capitalization modernized.

You are a miserable enthusiast for asking such a question. Certainly nothing can be done before another Pentecost, when an effusion of miraculous gifts, including the gift of tongues, will give effect to the commission of Christ as at first. What, Sir! Can you preach in Arabic, in Persic, in Hindustani, in Bengali, that you think it your duty to send the gospel to the heathens?

John C. Marshman (1794–1877), the son of Joshua Marshman (1768–1837), one of Carey’s respected co-workers in India, had a similar report about the words of the elder Ryland. As Marshman reported the incident, Ryland apparently dismissed the proposed topic with a frown and told Carey: “Young man, sit down. When God pleases to convert the heathen, he will do it without your aid or mine!” On the other hand, John Ryland, Jr. (1753–1825), the son of John Collett Ryland and in time one of Carey’s closest friends, strongly asserted that his father never uttered such sentiments. The burden of proof, however, does seem to indicate that Carey did indeed receive some sort of stinging rebuke from the elder Ryland.

Now, the standard interpretation of the elder Ryland’s reasoning has been to trace it back to the influence of hyper-Calvinism.<sup>5</sup> Although this author doubts that this is a sufficient theological explanation of Ryland’s outburst,<sup>6</sup> there is little doubt that hyper-Calvinism was a major challenge with which Carey and his circle of Baptist friends had to contend.<sup>7</sup> When Carey came to draw up a written defence of cross-cultural missions, *An Enquiry into the Obligations of Christians, to Use Means for the Conversion of the Heathens* (1792), he noted that some of his contemporaries had argued that the command to make disciples from all the nations was no longer incumbent upon the church. The Ancient Church, they maintained, had actually fulfilled that command. Moreover, according to Carey, they argued thus: “we have enough to do to attend

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<sup>5</sup> See, for example, Smith, *Life of William Carey*, 23; F. Deaville Walker, *William Carey: Missionary Pioneer and Statesman* (1925 ed.; repr. Chicago: Moody Press, n.d.), 55, who attributes Ryland’s remarks to “ultra-Calvinistic theories”; Drewery, *William Carey*, 30–1; George, *Faithful Witness*, 54–5; Phillip R. Johnson, “A Primer on Hyper-Calvinism” (1998; <http://www.spurgeon.org/~phil/articles/hypercal.htm>; accessed February 10, 2010); Malcolm B. Yarnell, III, *The Heart of A Baptist* (White Paper, No. 2; Fort Worth, Texas: The Center for Theological Research, Southwestern Baptist Theological Seminary, 2005), 2–3.

<sup>6</sup> See Appleby, ‘*I Can Plod...*’, 61–3; Iain H. Murray, “William Carey: Climbing the Rainbow”, *The Banner of Truth*, 349 (October 1992), 20-1; Michael A.G. Haykin, “John Collett Ryland & His Supposed Hyper-Calvinism Revisited” (*Historia ecclesiastica*, October 9, 2007; <http://www.andrewfullercenter.org/index.php/2007/10/jonh-collett-ryland-his-supposed-hyper-calvinism-revisited/>; accessed February 9, 2010).

<sup>7</sup> A. Christopher Smith, “Carey, William” in Gerald H. Anderson, ed., *Biographical Dictionary of Christian Missions* (New York: Simon & Schuster Macmillan, 1998), 115. On the circle of friends around Carey, see Michael A.G. Haykin, *One heart and one soul: John Sutcliffe of Olney, his friends, and his times* (Darlington, Co. Durham: Evangelical Press, 1994).

to the salvation of our own countrymen; and that, if God intends the salvation of the heathen, he will some way or other bring them to the gospel, or the gospel to them.”<sup>8</sup> In the book just mentioned, Carey was able to refute this entire argument handily by pointing out that the two other aspects of the text in Matthew 28 had no temporal limitations on them. The command to baptize was still very much in force and the promise of Christ’s abiding presence was still a comfort in time of trouble and turmoil. “Pity therefore,” Carey concluded, “humanity, and much more Christianity, call loudly for every possible exertion to introduce the gospel” amongst the unbelieving nations of the world.<sup>9</sup>

And twenty years later, in the 1810s, John Ryland, Jr. explicitly noted that the larger theological context in which Carey initially ministered was one in which polemical zeal for the doctrines of grace, the so-called five points of Calvinism, had led “some good men” to the extreme of denying that it was “the duty of all men to whom the gospel is published, to repent and believe the gospel.” The controversy over this issue became known in the eighteenth century as the Modern Question. Among the English and Welsh Baptists Ryland reckoned that the two key protagonists for the negative reply to this question were John Gill (1697–1771) and John Brine (1703–65), both of whom originally hailed from Northamptonshire and both of whom eventually moved to London in answer to pastoral calls. According to Ryland, it was due to their influence that many Baptist preachers were unable to freely call upon sinners to repent and believe the gospel. Ryland did point out, though, that both of these men abhorred antinomianism, “the notion that the [moral] law is not binding upon believers as a rule of conduct,” a view that often accompanied the rejection of the free offer of the gospel.<sup>10</sup>

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<sup>8</sup> *An Enquiry into the Obligations of Christians, to Use Means for the Conversion of the Heathens* (Leicester, 1792), 8.

<sup>9</sup> *Enquiry*, 8–13, quote from page 13. For an examination of the exegetical basis of Carey’s understanding of Matthew 28:19–20, see Peter O’Brien, “The Great Commission of Matthew 28:18–20. A Missionary Mandate or Not?”, *The Reformed Theological Review*, 35 (1976), 66–78.

<sup>10</sup> *The Work of Faith, the Labour of Love, and the Patience of Hope Illustrated; in the Life and Death of the Reverend Andrew Fuller* (London: Button & Son, 1816), 5–11. On Brine, see Walter Wilson, *The History and Antiquities of Dissenting Churches and Meeting Houses, in London, Westminster, and Southwark* (London, 1808), II, 574–9; Peter Toon, *The Emergence of Hyper-Calvinism in English Nonconformity 1689–1765* (London: Olive Tree, 1967), 100–2. In an anonymous tract entitled *Dr. Gill and Mr. Brine Vindicated, From the Charge of Error and Mistake with respect to Faith in Christ* (London: J. Chalmers, 1791), the author, who may well have been John Collett Ryland, stated Brine was “one of the holiest men I ever knew in my life” (p.6). For Brine’s own clear rejection of antinomianism, see his *Motives to Love and Unity among Calvinists, who differ in some Points* (London, 1753), 57–8. A full study of Brine’s life and thought is badly needed.

Now, what is prominent in this mini-discussion of hyper-Calvinism by Ryland is the rejection of the free offer of the gospel. In fact, for many today, hyper-Calvinism can be reduced to this single point of doctrine: the refusal to offer the gospel to all and sundry.<sup>11</sup> Hyper-Calvinism, however, involves more than simply this one matter.<sup>12</sup> Central to the reasoning that the gospel is not to be offered indiscriminately to all of humanity is, first and foremost, the doctrine of the eternal covenant of redemption between the three persons of the Godhead with regard to the salvation of the elect, and, then, the argument that the divine acts of union with Christ,

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The standard biographical sketch of Gill is John Rippon, *A Brief Memoir of the Life and Writings of the late Rev. John Gill, D.D.* (Repr. Harrisonburg, Virginia: Gano Books, 1992). For more recent studies of Gill and his theology, see Graham Harrison, *Dr. John Gill and His Teaching* (Annual Lecture of The Evangelical Library; London: The Evangelical Library, 1971); Tom Nettles, *By His Grace and for His Glory. A Historical, Theological, and Practical Study of the Doctrines of Grace in Baptist Life* (Grand Rapids: Baker Book House, 1986), 73-107, *passim*; George M. Ella, *John Gill and the Cause of God and Truth* (Eggleston, Co. Durham: Go Publications, 1995); Michael A.G. Haykin, ed., *The Life and Thought of John Gill (1697-1771): A Tercentennial Appreciation* (Leiden: E. J. Brill, 1997); and Timothy George, "John Gill" in his and David S. Dockery, eds., *Theologians of the Baptist Tradition* (Rev. ed.; Nashville, Tennessee: Broadman & Holman, 2001), 11-33.

For Gill's rejection of antinomianism, see his *The Necessity of Good Works unto Salvation Considered* (London: A. Ward, 1739) and *The Doctrine of Grace clear'd from the Charge of Licentiousness* (2<sup>nd</sup> ed.; London: G. Keith, 1751). And for a study of this area of Gill's thought, see especially Curt Daniel, "John Gill and Calvinistic Antinomianism" in Haykin, ed., *Life and Thought of John Gill*, 171-90. See also Alan P.F. Sell, *The Great Debate: Calvinism, Arminianism and Salvation* (1982 ed.; repr. Eugene, Oregon: Wipf & Stock, 1998), 79-80.

<sup>11</sup> See, for example, Timmy Brister's discussion of fears about hyper-Calvinism in the Southern Baptist Convention, "Hyper-Calvinism, Anti-Calvinism, and Founders Ministries" [*Provocations & Pantings*, December 5, 2008 (<http://timmybrister.com/2008/12/05/hyper-calvinism-anti-calvinism-and-founders-ministries/>); accessed February 9, 2010).

<sup>12</sup> For various definitions of hyper-Calvinism, see Toon, *Emergence of Hyper-Calvinism*, 144-6; *idem*, "Hyper-Calvinism" in Donald K. McKim and David F. Wright, eds., *Encyclopedia of The Reformed Faith* (Louisville, Kentucky: Westminster/John Knox Press/Edinburgh: Saint Andrew Press, 1992), 190; Johnson, "Primer on Hyper-Calvinism"; James Leo Garrett, Jr., *Baptist Theology: A Four-Century Study* (Macon, Georgia: Mercer University Press, 2009), 89. For problems with the use of the term "hyper-Calvinism," see Richard A. Muller, "John Gill and the Reformed Tradition: A Study in the Reception of Protestant Orthodoxy in the Eighteenth Century" in Haykin, ed., *Life and Thought of John Gill*, 51-6.

Geoffrey F. Nuttall ["Northamptonshire and *The Modern Question: A Turning-Point in Eighteenth-Century Dissent*", *The Journal of Theological Studies*, n.s. 16 (1965), 101, n.4] prefers the term "High Calvinism" to "the now more usual Hyper-Calvinism as less prejudiced and question-begging." Nuttall also prefers this term since it was in use in the late eighteenth century. As support for the latter point, he refers to the English edition of the New England historian Hannah Adams' *A View of Religions*, which Andrew Fuller edited and to which he also contributed a few entries, where the term "High Calvinists" appears in an article written by Fuller himself ["Calvinists", *A View of Religions* (3<sup>rd</sup> ed.; London: W. Button, 1805), 111]. Yet, in the same book, in the article entitled "Puritans"—in a passage that appears to have been added by Fuller—it is stated that in the eighteenth century the Congregationalists and Baptists "first veered towards high Calvinism, then forbore to exhort the unregenerate to repent, believe, or do any thing spiritually good; and by degrees many of them settled in gross Antinomianism" (*View of Religions*, 270-1). From this statement it seems that "high Calvinism" was seen as a step towards a form of Calvinism that had problems with the evangelization of all and sundry, but not exactly equivalent to the latter. I have, therefore, chosen to retain the use of the term "hyper-Calvinism."

justification, and adoption have been totally accomplished by God in eternity past.<sup>13</sup> In what follows, these arguments are considered through the medium of the writings of John Gill, whose thinking on these matters dominated numerous quarters of the eighteenth-century English and Welsh Baptist world, and who is regarded as the doyen of eighteenth-century hyper-Calvinism.<sup>14</sup>

*“The great & good Dr Gill”*

Gill was born in Kettering, Northamptonshire, in 1697, at the very close of the Puritan era. His early schooling at a local grammar school came to an abrupt end in 1708 when the school’s headmaster demanded that all of his pupils attend Anglican morning prayer. Gill’s parents were decided Dissenters and consequently withdrew their son from the school. Due to the fact that his parents had limited financial resources—Gill’s father Edward was a woollen merchant—they could not afford to send their son to a Dissenting Academy and so Gill’s formal education was over. But this did not check his hunger for learning.

Gill had acquired a good foundation in Latin and Greek before leaving school, and by the time that he was nineteen he was not only adept in both of these languages, but he was also well on the way to becoming proficient in Hebrew. Knowledge of these three languages gave him ready access to a wealth of Scriptural and theological knowledge, which he used to great advantage in the years that followed as he pastored Goat Yard Chapel, Southwark (later Carter Lane Baptist Church), in London from 1719 till his death in 1771.

During this long pastorate, Gill wrote a number of significant works. The first was a youthful exposition of the Song of Songs (1728), which approached this portion of Holy Scripture from the vantage-point that it was an allegory of the love between Christ and his church, a perspective that had a long pedigree all the way back to the patristic era, and which, according to John

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<sup>13</sup> Richard A. Muller, “The Spirit and the Covenant: John Gill’s Critique of the *Pactum Salutis*”, *Foundations*, 24, no.1 (January–March, 1981), 12.

<sup>14</sup> See, for example, J.M. Cramp, *Baptist History: From the Foundation of the Christian Church to the Present Time* (London: Elliot Stock, 1871), 435-436, 443; A. C. Underwood, *A History of the English Baptists* (2<sup>nd</sup> ed.; London: Carey Kingsgate Press, 1956), 135; W.R. Estep, Jr., “Gill, John” in *Encyclopedia of Southern Baptists* (Nashville, Tennessee: Broadman Press, 1958), I, 560; H. Leon McBeth, *The Baptist Heritage* (Nashville, Tennessee: Broadman Press, 1987), 176-178; Toon, “Hyper-Calvinism”, 190; Donald Macleod, “Dr T.F. Torrance and Scottish Theology: a Review Article”, *The Evangelical Quarterly*, 72 (2000), 57; Anonymous, “hyper-Calvinism” in George Thomas Kurian, ed., *Nelson’s Dictionary of Christianity* (Nashville, Tennessee: Nelson, 2005), 347.

Rippon (1751–1836), who succeeded him as pastor, “served very much to make Mr. Gill known.”<sup>15</sup> Then, in the late 1730s, Gill issued a robust defence of the so-called five points of Calvinism, *The Cause of God and Truth* (1735–8). Written a time when English Calvinism was very much a house in disarray, it helped to make Gill known as a prominent defender of the Reformed cause and revealed his deep indebtedness to seventeenth-century Reformed thought.<sup>16</sup> The story is told that when Gill was about to send this defence of Calvinism to the press, one of the members of his church told him in no uncertain terms that publication of the book would lead to the loss of some of Gill’s best friends as well as the loss of income. Gill’s reply was terse and gracious, but very much to the point: “I can afford to be poor,” he said, “but I cannot afford to injure my conscience.”<sup>17</sup> This anecdote says much about the man, in particular, his determination to stay the course when it came to cleaving to biblical truth. It also provides us with a central reason for his greatness as a Christian theologian, namely, his refusal to be shaped by pragmatic concerns. What mattered above all was the truth and its proclamation. Later in his life, when Gill published a solid critique of the views of John Wesley (1703–91) on the perseverance of the saints and predestination, Wesley referred to Gill as one who “fights for his opinions through thick and thin.”<sup>18</sup>

The 1740s saw the publication of Gill’s critical commentary on the entire New Testament—his profoundly learned *Exposition of the New Testament*, published in three folio volumes between 1746 and 1748. Gill’s companion to this commentary, his four-volume *Exposition of the Old Testament* did not appear for another fifteen years or so (1763–66). Together, these two sets became a central feature of the libraries of Baptist ministers throughout the British Isles. Also occupying a prominent place in those libraries was Gill’s *magnum opus*, *The Body of Doctrinal and Practical Divinity*, issued in 1769–70, which was the definitive codification of his theological perspective.

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<sup>15</sup> Rippon, *Brief Memoir*, 24.

<sup>16</sup> For details of this indebtedness, see Muller, “John Gill and the Reformed Tradition”, 51–68.

<sup>17</sup> Quoted C.H. Spurgeon, *Autobiography*, eds. Susannah Spurgeon and Joseph Harrald (Rev. ed.; Edinburgh/Carlisle, Pennsylvania: Banner of Truth, 1973), 2:477.

<sup>18</sup> Cited George, “John Gill”, 18.

It is noteworthy that when William Williams Pantycelyn (1717–91), one of the central figures of eighteenth-century Welsh Calvinistic Methodism and the author of “Guide me, O thou great Jehovah,” was dying in 1791, he thanked God for the “true religion” that he had found particularly in the writings of “Dr. Goodwin, Dr. Owen, Dr. Gill, Marshall, Harvey, [and] Usher.”<sup>19</sup> Four of these authors are Puritans—the two leading Independent theologians, Thomas Goodwin (1600–79) and John Owen (1616–83), the Anglo-Irish Episcopalian James Ussher (1581–1656), and the English Presbyterian Walter Marshall (1628–80). “Harvey” is the Anglican Calvinist James Hervey (1714–58), one of the members of the Wesleys’ Holy Club, famous in his day for a defence of Calvinism, *Theron and Aspasio* (1755), and a close friend of Gill.

That Gill should appear in the company of four Puritans says much about his way of doing theology as well as the form of his publications. In a day when brevity was highly prized as a literary quality, Gill’s works read and definitely looked like the massive tomes of the baroque print culture of the Puritan era. In part, this may have had something to do with Gill’s character. As Rippon noted in his memoir of Gill, “The Doctor considered not any subject superficially, or by halves. As deeply as human sagacity, enlightened by grace, could penetrate, he went to the bottom of everything he engaged in.”<sup>20</sup> In part, it also reflected Gill’s deep love for the Word of God and the very Puritan conviction that all of divine revelation needed to be taught to the people of God.

But for some of his contemporaries, Gill’s bent for systematic theology was off-putting. Surely it is a lack of interest in the systematizing of Christian thought that lies behind the famous remark of the younger Robert Hall (1764–1831) about Gill’s writings. Hall was once in conversation with the Welsh Baptist preacher Christmas Evans (1766–1838) when the latter expressed his admiration of Gill and said that he wished that Gill’s works had been written in Welsh. Hall, ever the vivacious conversationalist, quickly retorted, “I wish they had, sir; I wish they had with all my heart, for then I should never have read them. They are a continent of mud, sir.”<sup>21</sup> In point of

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<sup>19</sup> Cited Eifion Evans, “William Williams of Pant Y Celyn”, *The Evangelical Library Bulletin*, 42 (Spring, 1969), 6.

<sup>20</sup> Rippon, *Brief Memoir*, 137.

<sup>21</sup> Cited Olinthus Gregory, “A Brief Memoir of the Rev. Robert Hall, A.M.” in his ed., *The Works of the Rev. Robert Hall, A.M.* (New York: Harper & Brothers, 1854), 82. Hall expressed an identical opinion about the works of the Puritan John Owen. See John Greene, “Reminiscences of the Rev. Robert Hall, A.M.” in Gregory, ed., *Works of*

fact, this is a singularly unfair remark that tells us more about Hall than it does about Gill. Very few of those who read Gill in the eighteenth century would have described his work thus, even those who were critical of some of Gill's theological emphases, like John Ryland, Jr. or Andrew Fuller. For most, he was "the great & good Dr Gill," as the hymnwriter Augustus Montague Toplady (1740–78) described the London divine not long after his death.<sup>22</sup>

It is important to note that Gill was not only deeply shaped by the way the Puritan divines did theology, but he also shared much of their ethos and piety.<sup>23</sup> Evidence of this can be found especially in his early treatise on the Song of Songs, but also at various points throughout his voluminous corpus. For example, he himself practised and also recommended to his readers and hearers the Puritan discipline of meditation, which, when it forms a regular part of a believer's walk with God, will, according to Gill, "sweetly ravish our souls, raise our affections, inflame our love, and quicken our faith."<sup>24</sup> As he explained further:

By meditation a soul feeds on Christ, on his person, blood, and righteousness; and finds a pleasure, a sweetness, and a delight therein;...by it a believing soul feeds upon the gospel, its truths, and promises, and receives much refreshment from thence;...being cleansed in some measure from their former filthiness and uncleanness of their minds, they ascend heavenwards in their thoughts, desires, and affections, which they employ by meditating upon pure, spiritual, and heavenly things;... Meditation fits a man for prayer, and fills him with praise...<sup>25</sup>

### *The pactum salutis*

As a Reformed theologian, Gill had inherited the theological concept of an intra-Trinitarian covenant of salvation called the *pactum salutis*, which was made in eternity past and which had been a feature of Reformed thought since the sixteenth century. However, Gill was also aware

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*the Rev. Robert Hall*, IV, 37–8, note \*. By contrast, John Collett Ryland felt that the study of Gill's theology led one into "an ocean of divinity" (cited Estep, "Gill, John", 560).

<sup>22</sup> Letter to William Lunell, October 25, 1771 (Thomas Haweis Collection, Center for Methodist Studies Collections, Bridwell Library, Southern Methodist University).

<sup>23</sup> See the extremely helpful study of Gill's piety by Gregory A. Wills, "A Fire That Burns Within: The Spirituality of John Gill" in Haykin, ed., *Life and Thought of John Gill*, 191–210. Also see Oliver, *History of the English Calvinistic Baptists*, 12–15. Pace Muller, Muller, "Spirit and the Covenant", 12: "Gill's precise systematization...of Christian theology" lacked "the warm piety of earlier Reformed and Puritan thought."

<sup>24</sup> *An Exposition of the Book of Solomon's Song, Commonly called Canticles* (London: Aaron Ward, 1728), 32 (commentary on Song of Songs 1:4).

<sup>25</sup> *Solomon's Song*, 171 (commentary on Song of Songs 4:2).

that while previous Reformed theologians like Johann Heinrich Heidegger (1633–98), Louis de Dieu (1590–1642), Johann Cocceius (1603–69), Hermann Witsius (1636–1708), and John Owen (1616–83) had treated this eternal covenant at some length, they had focused their attention only on the involvement of the Father and the Son in this covenant. Justification for this focus had been found by these theologians in Zechariah 6:13, where it is stated that there shall be a “counsel of peace” between the Lord of hosts and the priest-king, namely, the Lord Christ.<sup>26</sup> But Gill, who, as has been noted, was a key defender of the complete sovereignty of God’s grace, and was also robust in his advocacy of Trinitarianism in a day when rationalistic forces were seeking to undermine the biblical concept of the doctrine of the Trinity,<sup>27</sup> sought to interpret the eternal covenant from a distinctly Trinitarian perspective.<sup>28</sup> As Gill explained:

[I]t was in Jehovah the Father’s thoughts, to save men by his Son; he in his infinite wisdom saw he was the fittest person for this work, and, in his own mind, chose him to it... Now in the eternal council he moved it, and proposed it to his Son as the most advisable step that could be taken, to bring about the designed salvation; who readily agreed to it, and said, “Lo, I come to do thy will, O God”, (Heb. 10:7) from Psalm 40:7, 8; and the Holy Spirit expressed his approbation of him, as the fittest person to be the Saviour, by joining with the Father in the mission of him,...and by forming his human nature in time, and filling it with his gifts and graces without measure.<sup>29</sup>

The Spirit was not “a mere bystander, spectator, and witness” of this eternal covenant, as previous theological discussions of the *pactum salutis* had implied since they did not clearly

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<sup>26</sup> *A Complete Body of Doctrinal and Practical Divinity* 2.6 (1839 ed.; repr. Paris, Arkansas: The Baptist Standard Bearer, 1989), 211. Subsequent references to this work will refer to it as *Doctrinal and Practical Divinity*, and they will include book and chapter, and, in brackets, the respective pagination from this edition.

<sup>27</sup> Gill authored a powerful defence of Nicene Trinitarianism near the beginning of his ministry: *The Doctrine of the Trinity, Stated and Vindicated* (London: Aaron Ward, 1731). As John Rippon, Gill’s pastoral successor, also noted (*Brief Memoir*, 127–8): “The Doctor not only watched over his people, “with great affection, fidelity, and love;” but he also watched his pulpit also. He would not, if he knew it, admit any one to preach for him, who was either cold-hearted to the doctrine of the Trinity; or who denied the divine filiation of the Son of God; or who objected to conclude his prayers with the usual doxology to Father, Son, and Holy Spirit, as three equal Persons in the one Jehovah. Sabellians, Arians, and Socinians, he considered as real enemies of the cross of Christ. They dared not ask him to preach, nor could he in conscience, permit them to officiate for him. He conceived that, by this uniformity of conduct, he adorned the pastoral office.” For a good example of the serious light in which Gill viewed deviation from the doctrine of the Trinity, see Sayer Rudd, *Impartial Reflections on the Minute Which The Author received, from The Ministers of The Calvinistical Baptist Board, by the hands of Mess. Gill and Brine* (London, 1736).

<sup>28</sup> Muller, “Spirit and the Covenant”, 4–14.

<sup>29</sup> *Doctrinal and Practical Divinity* 2.6 (213).

explicate his role in it. The divine Spirit was very much “a party concerned” in this everlasting covenant.<sup>30</sup>

Gill found support for this inclusion of the Spirit in the *pactum salutis* from such biblical assertions as the Spirit’s involvement in shaping the humanity of Christ within the womb of Mary (Matt 1:18–20), his empowerment of Christ during his earthly ministry (e.g., Matt 12:28), and his enablement of Jesus to offer himself as a propitiatory sacrifice to the Father (Heb 9:14).<sup>31</sup> Gill also reasoned from the fact that since the Spirit is described in Eph 1:14 as the “Holy Spirit of promise,” he must be the one who makes real in the lives of the elect all of the promises made for them in eternity, things such as justification, pardon of sin, and adoption. But this would not happen if the Spirit had not “approved of and assented to” those very promises in eternity past when, together with the Father and with the Son, he made the everlasting covenant.<sup>32</sup>

The Spirit, therefore, makes the blessings promised to the elect in eternity past by means of the everlasting covenant a reality in time. For example, one of these blessings is the blessing of justification. The Holy Spirit brings this blessing into the lives of the elect by the preaching of the gospel and by setting it “in the view of an awakened sinner.” The “illumination of his [i.e. the Spirit’s] grace” then “works faith” in the elect “to receive it.” The same is true with regard to forgiveness of sins and adoption.<sup>33</sup> And without the “special energy of the Spirit,” the “most comfortable doctrines and precious promises of the gospel,” even when preached with great vehemence, will be of no avail to the one who hears of them.<sup>34</sup> “In short,” Gill emphasized, “all the grace given to the elect in Christ, before the world began, all the things that are freely given them of God in the covenant, the Spirit in time makes known unto them, and declares their interest in them.”<sup>35</sup>

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<sup>30</sup> *Doctrinal and Practical Divinity* 2.14 (244).

<sup>31</sup> *Doctrinal and Practical Divinity* 2.14 (244–6).

<sup>32</sup> *Doctrinal and Practical Divinity* 2.14 (244–5). See also Toon, *Emergence of Hyper-Calvinism*, 113–4; Muller, “Spirit and the Covenant”, 9–10.

<sup>33</sup> *Doctrinal and Practical Divinity* 2.14; 6.8 (245, 506).

<sup>34</sup> *Solomon’s Song*, 143 (commentary on Song of Songs 3:4).

<sup>35</sup> *Doctrinal and Practical Divinity* 2.14; 6.8 (245, 506). See Muller, “Spirit and the Covenant”, 10.

As Richard Muller has pointed out, the seventeenth-century expression of the eternal *pactum salutis*, which did not explicitly include the Spirit, thereby allowed the elect to be involved in their conversion. They could not co-operate in the covenanting of the Father and the Son for their eventual salvation, for that was done in eternity past. But as the Spirit made this eternal plan a reality in time, the conversion of the elect did not take place without the exercise of their faith and the commitment of their will. Gill, however, wished to be consistent in setting forth a completely monergistic view of salvation. The explicit inclusion of the Holy Spirit within the eternal council of peace removed any possibility of synergism and the human response of the elect to divine grace.<sup>36</sup>

### *Eternal justification*

Gill's desire to exalt God's grace his doctrine of salvation can be seen most clearly in the London Baptist's defence of the concept of eternal justification. According to Gill, just as God's determination to elect a people for salvation actually constitutes their election, so his purpose to declare them righteous in Christ is their actual justification.<sup>37</sup> The pronouncement in time within the heart of a believer that he or she has been justified is simply then a repetition of "that grand original sentence of it, conceived in the mind of God from all eternity."<sup>38</sup>

Eternal justification thus precedes faith, and, in fact, a person's faith is a product of his or her being justified. As Gill forthrightly stated:

Faith adds nothing to the *esse*, only to the *bene esse* of justification;...it is a complete act in the eternal mind of God, without the being or consideration of faith, or any foresight of it; a man is as much justified before as after it, in the account of God; and after he does believe, his justification does not depend on his acts of faith.<sup>39</sup>

In his tract *The Doctrines of God's Everlasting Love to his Elect, and their Eternal Union with Christ*, Gill simply stated that:

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<sup>36</sup> Muller, "Spirit and the Covenant", 10–12.

<sup>37</sup> *Doctrinal and Practical Divinity* 2.5 (203 and 205). On this concept in Gill, see especially George M. Ella, *John Gill and Justification from Eternity: A Tercentenary Appreciation* (Eggleston, Co. Durham: Go Publications, 1998); Naylor, *Calvinism, Communion and the Baptists*, 190–9; and Oliver, *History of the English Calvinistic Baptists*, 6–8. Ella defends Gill's teaching on this issue, while both Naylor and Oliver are critical of Gill's position.

<sup>38</sup> *Doctrinal and Practical Divinity* 2.6 (209).

<sup>39</sup> *Doctrinal and Practical Divinity* 2.5 (204).

union to Christ is before faith... Vital union is before faith. ...Faith does not give us a being in Christ, or unite us to him; it is the fruit, effect, and evidence of our being in Christ, and union to him.<sup>40</sup>

If justification is actually antecedent to faith, though, why does the New Testament—for example, Galatians 2:16; Romans 5:1—regularly speak of faith as a pre-requisite to justification? Gill rejects the argument that faith *per se* is able to save anyone, for he knows that by faith “Christ, and his righteousness” is “apprehended, received, and embraced.”<sup>41</sup> What these texts must mean, then, is that faith is needed to know that one is justified and to revel in this fact.<sup>42</sup>

The doctrine of eternal justification also means that the status of the person who is both among the elect and yet to be converted must be viewed from two different angles. On the one hand, this person is under God’s condemnation and as such needs to be regarded as a child of wrath. But, as one who has been justified from eternity past, in Christ they are “always viewed and accounted righteous.”<sup>43</sup> Theoretically this argumentation could open the door to genuine antinomianism. Little wonder that Gill had to fend off charges of antinomianism at a number of points in his ministry.<sup>44</sup>

Also, with regard to spirituality, there is little doubt that the doctrine of eternal justification helped to foster a climate of profound introspection. To come to Christ for salvation, one first had to determine if one was among the elect justified in eternity past. The net effect of this teaching—though unintended by Gill—was to place the essence of conversion and faith not in believing the gospel, but in believing that one was among the elect. Instead of attention being directed away from oneself towards Christ, the convicted sinner was turned inwards upon himself or herself to search for evidence that he or she was truly elect and therefore able to be

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<sup>40</sup> *The Doctrines of God’s Everlasting Love to his Elect, and their Eternal Union with Christ* (3<sup>rd</sup> ed.; London, 1752), 33 and 39.

<sup>41</sup> *Doctrinal and Practical Divinity* 6.8 (511).

<sup>42</sup> *Doctrinal and Practical Divinity* 2.6 (208).

<sup>43</sup> *Doctrinal and Practical Divinity* 2.6 (208).

<sup>44</sup> See above, note 7. Chad van Dixhoorn has identified the concept of eternal justification as a key intellectual origin for various forms of seventeenth-century antinomianism [“Reforming the Reformation: Theological Debate at the Westminster Assembly 1642-1652”, 7 vols. (Unpublished Ph.D. Thesis, University of Cambridge, 2004), 1:277]. I am indebted to Mark Jones and Gert van den Brink, “Thomas Goodwin and Johannes Maccovius on Justification from Eternity” (Unpublished paper, 2010), 9, for this reference.

converted. And by making eternal justification so central to his soteriology, Gill essentially reversed the biblical order in which one must believe in Christ before one is capable of knowing that he or she is among the elect.<sup>45</sup>

It is also important to note that in the most influential Baptist confessional statement in Baptist history, the *Second London Confession of Faith* (1677/89), Gill's seventeenth-century Calvinistic Baptist forebears explicitly rejected the notion of eternal justification. In the article on justification, it is clearly stated that "God did from all eternity decree to justify all the elect, and Christ did in the fullness of time die for their sins, and rise again for their justification; nevertheless, they are not justified personally, until the Holy Spirit doth in time due actually apply Christ unto them."<sup>46</sup> The strongest theological influences on Gill, however, came through the early eighteenth-century London Baptist John Skepp (d.1721), who participated in Gill's ordination and whose sole literary publication, *A divine energy* (1722), was an out-and-out rejection of the free offer of the gospel. Gill reprinted it with a recommendatory preface in 1751.<sup>47</sup>

### *The free offer of the gospel*

It should occasion no surprise that Gill's development of the doctrine of the everlasting covenant, in which he highlighted the role of the Spirit, along with his tenacious commitment to the notion of eternal justification should then lead to the rejection of the free offer of the gospel.<sup>48</sup> For example, in a tract that he wrote in response to a rejection of predestination by the Methodist leader John Wesley (1703–91), Gill considered biblical verses like Acts 17:30, which states that God "now commands all men everywhere to repent" and Mark 16:15, in which there

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<sup>45</sup> Andrew Fuller, *Strictures on Sandemanianism, in Twelve Letters to a Friend* [*The Complete Works of the Rev. Andrew Fuller*, revised Joseph Belcher (1845 ed.; repr. Harrisonburg, Virginia: Sprinkle Publications, 1988), 2:563–4]; E.F. Clipsham, "Andrew Fuller and Fullerism: A Study in Evangelical Calvinism", *The Baptist Quarterly*, 20 (1963–1964), 103; Sell, *Great Debate*, 82; Pieter de Vries, *John Bunyan on the Order of Salvation*, trans. C. van Haaften (New York: Peter Lang, 1994), 109; Toon, "Hyper-Calvinism", 190.

<sup>46</sup> *The Second London Confession of Faith* 11.4. See the comments of Oliver, *History of the English Calvinistic Baptists*, 6–7.

<sup>47</sup> On Skepp, see Wilson, *History and Antiquities of Meeting Houses*, II, 572–4; Nuttall, "Northamptonshire and *The Modern Question*", 117–8; Toon, *Emergence of Hyper-Calvinism*, 85–9; Sell, *Great Debate*, 78; Garrett, Jr., *Baptist Theology*, 91–2.

<sup>48</sup> Nettles believes differently; see his "John Gill and the Evangelical Awakening" in Haykin, ed., *Life and Thought of John Gill*, 131–70.

is a command to “preach the gospel to every creature.” Gill did not believe that either of these verses can be used to support the idea of the free offer of the gospel.

He admitted that the “gospel is indeed ordered to be preached to every creature to whom it is sent and comes.” But, Gill observed, it needs noting that God has not seen fit to send the gospel to every person in the world: “there have been multitudes in all ages that have not heard it.” Therefore, Gill stated, “that there are universal offers of grace and salvation made to all men, I utterly deny.” Not even to the elect does God make an “offer” of salvation. Rather, the proclamation of the gospel informs the elect that “grace and salvation are provided for them in the everlasting covenant, procured for them by Christ, published and revealed in the gospel, and applied by the Spirit.”<sup>49</sup> In his systematic theology, Gill suggests another way of dodging the plain import of such verses: they are really only speaking about “an external reformation of life and manners,” not “spiritual and internal conversion.”<sup>50</sup> Not surprisingly Gill warns gospel preachers to be careful lest, when they preach repentance, they give their hearers the idea that repentance is “within the compass of the power of man’s will.” To preach like this is what Gill calls the “rant of some men’s ministry, . . . low and mean stuff, too mean for, below, and unworthy of a minister of the gospel.”<sup>51</sup>

### *Concluding reflections*

Now, it would be easy to think that Gill had simply allowed his reading of the Bible on these issues to be determined by his theological system. But the truth is more complex than this. Guiding Gill, first of all, was a genuine desire to exalt God and his sovereign grace. What he said early on in his ministry shaped his entire life: “I would not willingly say or write anything that is contrary to the purity and holiness of God.”<sup>52</sup>

Then, his was a day, when the doctrines of grace were under heavy attack from the rationalism of the Deists and the moralism in much of the Church of England. It would have been easy for Gill and his fellow Calvinistic Baptists to view themselves as God’s last bastion of truth in England.

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<sup>49</sup> *The Doctrine of Predestination Stated, and Set in the Scripture-Light* (2<sup>nd</sup> ed.; London: G. Keith, 1752), 28–9.

<sup>50</sup> Cited Oliver, *History of the English Calvinistic Baptists*, 9.

<sup>51</sup> *Doctrines of God’s Everlasting Love*, 79–80. I owe this reference to Garrett, Jr., *Baptist Theology*, 99.

<sup>52</sup> *Doctrines of God’s Everlasting Love*, 41.

In such a situation, it is easy to see how one's defence of certain biblical doctrines—in this case, the doctrines of grace—could become unbalanced, and even produce error.

It is noteworthy that Gill's day was the so-called Age of Reason, when men and women began to trust in their own abilities and wisdom to understand the world in which they lived and what was incumbent upon them as human beings. Gill would have been horrified to think that his theology was deeply shaped by this culture that was beginning to trust in the omniscience of human reason. But it seems to this reader of Gill's works, that the Baptist theologian takes Scriptural matters to a logical end beyond what Scripture clearly affirms. Like it or not, Gill was shaped by the rationalism of his day.

Gill's theology did hamper passionate evangelism and outreach. But, in the long run, this man's theology was used by God when revival came to the Baptists at the close of the eighteenth century. In a world in which men were abandoning the main contours of biblical orthodoxy—the infallibility of the Word of God, the doctrines of the Trinity, the incarnation and resurrection of Christ—Gill held fast to all of these and enabled the Calvinistic Baptists to weather the intellectual storms of the eighteenth century. And in so doing, his fidelity gave form and shape to the coals of orthodoxy upon which the fire of revival fell later in the century through men like Andrew Fuller, John Ryland, Jr., and William Carey.