

# Lion and Lamb Apologetics'

## Ten Baptists Everyone Should Know: John Gill

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When John Gill (1697-1771) died he was widely recognized as the greatest Baptist theologian of the eighteenth century. While pastoring the same congregation for nearly fifty-two years, Gill more than earned the nickname, “Dr. Voluminous,” by publishing more than ten thousand pages during his lifetime! Gill holds the distinction of being the first Baptist to write a systematic theology, as well as being the first Baptist to write a verse-by-verse commentary on the entire Bible. No wonder that Augustus Toplady predicted shortly after Gill’s death that: “While true religion and sound learning have a single friend remaining in the British Empire, the works and name of GILL will be precious and revered.”

John Gill was born on November 23, 1697 at Kettering, Northamptonshire. The young Gill attended local grammar school until the age of eleven when he was forced to withdraw because of a new policy enforced by the schoolmaster which required that all students attend the daily prayer services of the Church of England. But Gill’s keen mind was already recognizable at this early point in his life. He had already mastered Greek and Latin by the time he was forced to withdraw from the grammar school and he read through the entire Greek New Testament by the age of ten! After beginning to study on his own, Gill taught himself Hebrew with a secondhand grammar and lexicon.

Although Gill was converted at the age of 12, he was not baptized until the age of 19. Soon after his baptism Gill began to preach and teach the Word of God. Gill would

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eventually receive an invitation to preach in London in view of a call at the church which was currently meeting at Goat Yard, Horsleydown, in Southwark. This prominent Particular Baptist congregation had been started by none other than [Benjamin Keach](#) in 1672.

After being in London for only four years, Gill began to gain some notoriety. In 1724 he became a member of the Particular Baptist Fund and published his first material, a sermon preached on the occasion of the funeral of one of his deacons. Many other writings followed and he became well known to Baptists both in England as well as in America. In 1729, Gill began a weekly lecture that was delivered each Wednesday evening at Eastcheap. Many of Gill's most famous writings were originally presented as lectures in this series.

During Gill's career he not only produced [a commentary on every book of the Bible](#) he also published in two volumes, [A Body of Doctrinal Divinity](#), and later a companion volume titled [A Body of Practical Divinity](#). These volumes are considered to be Gill's *magnum opus*. John Rippon, Gill's successor as pastor and first biographer, states that found in *A Body of Doctrinal Divinity* "is the Doctor's whole creed. Here his very heart appears, while he states, maintains, and defends the Truth as it is in Jesus."

Gill placed a strong emphasis on the doctrine of the nature of God as a Trinity. This was a vital issue in his day as many of the General Baptists had come to reject the deity of Christ and the doctrine of the Trinity. As a result of this doctrinal confusion Gill was moved to write a *Treatise on the Defense of the Trinity* in 1731. Gill discussed the importance of the doctrine of the Trinity in his *Body of Doctrinal Divinity* which was published in 1769 as follows:

The doctrine of the Trinity is often represented as a speculative point, of no great moment whether it is believed or no, too mysterious and curious to be pried into, and that it had better be left alone than meddled with; but, alas! it enters into the whole of our salvation, and all the parts of it; into all the doctrines of the gospel, and into the experience of the saints.

Clearly, Gill's recognition of the importance of the doctrine of the Trinity motivated Gill to write in defense of this central doctrine.

Gill was also an ardent defender of the doctrines of God's sovereign grace which are often nicknamed as Calvinism. He wrote a major defense of these doctrines in his [The Cause of God and Truth](#). This work was a response to Daniel Whitby's *Discourses on the Five Points* which were considered unanswerable before Gill responded. Gill's definitive response

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included detailed exegesis of relevant passages of Scripture, the philosophical arguments, and a survey of patristic literature related to the doctrines of God's sovereign grace.

Gill's much needed defense of the doctrines of God's grace has caused him to often be characterized as a hyper-Calvinist. While it is true that Gill wrongly taught a doctrine of eternal justification, it was never a hindrance to his proclamation of the gospel to sinners. While others would take this teaching to its logical conclusion and fail to preach the gospel promiscuously, Gill was not guilty of this error.

Unfortunately, Gill has not been the beneficiary in subsequent generations of the same good will which was shown by his contemporaries. Already by the next generation, the English preacher Robert Hall famously denounced Gill's works as "a continent of mud." In his essay on Gill in *Theologians of the Baptist Tradition*, Timothy George lists three reasons why he believes that Gill is no longer revered. First, Gill's polemical writings inadvertently produced many enemies. Second, Gill's theological descendants perhaps took Gill's theology further than he would have liked, thus creating a distorted view of the real Gill. Third, Gill's prodigious defense of the doctrines of grace has served to overshadow other aspects of his theology causing him to appear to be more a defender of the doctrine of predestination than of Biblical truth in general. In his essay, George argues for "a more balanced presentation of his life and work" (13).

To learn more about Gill, please see the aforementioned essay by Timothy George in [Theologians of the Baptist Tradition](#). The classic short introduction was done by Gill's successor as pastor, John Rippon, and is simply titled [A Memoir of the Life and Writings of Rev. John Gill, D.D.](#) A number of Gill's works are still in print and are available from [The Baptist Standard Bearer, Inc.](#) There are also several of Gill's books available for [free on Google Books](#). For an excellent treatment of John Gill and hyper-Calvinism, see [Hyper-Calvinism and the theology of John Gill](#) (PDF) which was originally presented at the 2010 True Church Conference in Muscle Shoals, Alabama.

*This is Part Four of ten on an ongoing series by Steve Weaver.*



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