

# Editorial: Remembering the Life and Theology of John Gill (1697-1771)

STEPHEN J. WELLUM

---

**Stephen J. Wellum** is Professor of Christian Theology at The Southern Baptist Theological Seminary and editor of *Southern Baptist Journal of Theology*. He received his PhD from Trinity Evangelical Divinity School, and he is the author of numerous essays and articles and the co-author with Peter Gentry of *Kingdom through Covenant, 2<sup>nd</sup> edition* (Crossway, 2012, 2018) and *God's Kingdom through God's Covenants: A Concise Biblical Theology* (Crossway, 2015); the co-editor of *Progressive Covenantalism* (B&H, 2016); the author of *God the Son Incarnate: The Doctrine of the Person of Christ* (Crossway, 2016) and *Christ Alone—The Uniqueness of Jesus as Savior* (Zondervan, 2017); and the co-author of *Christ from Beginning to End: How the Full Story of Scripture Reveals the Full Glory of Christ* (Zondervan, 2018); and the author of *The Person of Christ: An Introduction* (Crossway, 2021).

Christian theology, indeed, objective truth is only possible because the triune God of Scripture is there, he has created and governs this world according to his plan, and he has spoken to us, to borrow from the thought of Francis Schaeffer. As a result of God's spoken word-revelation to us through prophets and apostles and made permanent in Scripture, the church has a strong epistemological warrant for truth and theology. For this reason, Scripture alone (*sola Scriptura*) is our *final* authority for all of our theological and doctrinal thinking about God, ourselves, and the world. Scripture alone is sufficient for all we need in this life for faith in Christ and to live lives that are pleasing to our triune Creator and Lord to the praise of his glory and grace.

However, in rightly and properly emphasizing the importance of God's word-revelation to us for us to know truth and to do theology, Christian

theology also stresses the importance of tradition, learning from the past, and standing on the shoulders of those who have gone before us. We must never think that with our right emphasis on *sola Scriptura* and its normative role in the church that this rejects the vital role that tradition and learning from the past serve in our thinking and lives. To conclude such a thing would be a grave mistake. The proper balance between Scripture and tradition is that Scripture is “magisterial” and tradition is “ministerial.” But for something to be “ministerial” still means that it has a crucial role to play. In fact, the Reformers made this point against the elevation of tradition by the Roman Catholic Church. Rome wrongly elevated tradition to a “magisterial” role along with Scripture, and the Reformers rightly rejected this view. Only the triune God and his word are “magisterial;” everything else is only “ministerial.” We must learn from tradition, historical theology, and our forefathers in the faith, but tradition must always be placed under the authority of God’s word.

The proper balance between Scripture and tradition is important for us to remember today. Sometimes in the church, we can forget the vital role that tradition plays, especially given the pressures of our present culture. If we are not careful, we, as the church, may imbibe our current cultural views that are now in the process of overturning everything we can learn from the past. Given the application of a radical individualism which began in the Enlightenment, and which now in postmodernism, has turned inward and toxic, anything from the past is viewed with suspicion. The cry of our day is to tear down the past and to replace it, sadly, with the relativism and subjectivism of postmodern thought. Today, we are told that history and tradition is a long story of oppression, hence the reason to become revolutionaries and to throw off the past. But what this breeds is ultimately not freedom and liberation from the past, but, especially when hinged to postmodern thought, more oppression and totalitarianism.

For Christian theology and the church, the view of our present-day culture must be rejected. Instead, we must return to the true and authoritative standard of God’s word to evaluate everything, as we do not turn away from the past but learn from it in light of the norm of Scripture. As 21<sup>st</sup> century Christians, we are part of a heritage of faithful theology, confessional orthodoxy, and Christian role models that help us navigate our present age. We ignore learning from the past and our forefathers to our spiritual peril.

Why do I begin this way in an issue devoted to the life and theology of

John Gill? For this reason: I want to remind us that to spend time looking at the life and theology of a Christian man, husband, father, pastor, and theologian from the past is not a waste of time. Instead, it is most valuable, despite the fact that all people, including Gill, have various strengths and weaknesses. But nonetheless warts and all, we may still learn from such an individual lessons for us today both positively and negatively, and Gill is an excellent person to retrieve and learn from today.

When the name John Gill is mentioned it often is received with a mixed sentiment. For some, Gill is a hero, a towering intellect, an astute theologian, and someone who has much to teach us. For others, Gill is viewed as a dangerous person since he is often identified with hyper-Calvinism. In fact, for some, Gill is the reason why many who imbibed his theology did not freely offer the gospel to all people. No doubt, in thinking about Gill's life and theology, there is justification for both of these sentiments, which, again is a reminder that all people, whether past or present, have various strengths and weaknesses. However, it is our conviction that Gill fits more in the former category than the latter. Although we need to reject his view of eternal justification and some of its implications for the indiscriminate preaching of the gospel, this is not all that John Gill is known for. In fact, given the period of time in which he lived, Gill was crucial in responding to the Enlightenment rationalism that surrounded him, and helping the church to stand against the acids of modernity that attempted to erode the theological confidence of the church in his day. Gill's work on this front shored up the church for generations to come, and there is much we can learn from him for us today as we face similar challenges.

Specifically, as the articles in this issue of *SBJT* will demonstrate, Gill is an excellent role model for us in how to defend theological orthodoxy for such foundational doctrines as the Trinity, Christology, and the doctrines of grace. As in his day, so in ours, these doctrinal areas are in trouble as evidenced by various polls and theologically weak churches (for example, see "The State of Theology" poll at <https://thestateoftheology.com/> and the confusion within the evangelical church on these foundational doctrines). In addition, as a number of articles will demonstrate, Gill's love for the truth, his love of God and not fearing man, and his pursuit of godliness are areas that we also need to emulate today. In a time that has lost the very grounds for truth, and in a day that seems more willing to compromise the truth than

to stand firm on God's word, Gill serves as an example for us of those who were willing to sacrifice their to learn from those who have gone before us, so that we do not repeat the mistakes of the past. My prayer is that this issue on John Gill's life and theology will encourage us to this end.