

# John Gill and the Charge of Hyper-Calvinism: Assessing Contemporary Arguments in Defense of Gill in Light of Gill's Doctrine of Eternal Justification

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For Baptists, John Gill has great historical significance.<sup>1</sup> He pastored a church meeting at Goat Yard, Horsleydown, in Southwark, and this meeting later became the Metropolitan Tabernacle famously led by Charles Spurgeon. Gill was the first Baptist to write a commentary on every book of the Bible and the first Baptist to compose a comprehensive systematic theology. Both his pastoral work and extensive writing ministry allowed him to exercise considerable

influence among Particular Baptists during the eighteenth century.<sup>2</sup>

Though recognizing Gill's importance, historians disagree over the nature of his theology. Some consider him a hyper-Calvinist who did not offer the Gospel freely and who denied duty faith, that is, the belief that all sinners have a duty to respond positively to the Gospel. Others defend him from this charge and present him as a model evangelical pastor.<sup>3</sup> Debate over Gill's theology has even appeared in the pages of *Baptist Quarterly* and, given Gill's significance, remains an important issue in the study of Baptist history.<sup>4</sup>

Much of this disagreement originates from the fact that historians have rarely examined Gill on his own terms. Arguments that portray him as a hyper-Calvinist rely often on guilt by association, incorrect claims about his theological convictions, or preconceived understandings of what constitutes genuine Calvinism.<sup>5</sup> As I will demonstrate, arguments offered in defense of Gill fare little better. They often fail to interpret Gill's soteriology accurately.

Students of Baptist history should seek to discern Gill's true theological identity by carefully examining his theological convictions. I aim to contribute to this cause by surveying his primary theological focus—a desire to minimize human agency in the reception of salvation—and its chief accompanying doctrine, eternal justification.<sup>6</sup> I will then probe how Gill's soteriology affected his understanding of Gospel offers and duty faith. I will conclude by interacting with Gill's primary defenders, demonstrating how a failure to read his soteriology correctly has often led to inaccurate portrayals of his true convictions. This approach will reveal that Gill indeed denied Gospel offers and duty faith. Put another way, it connects Gill with a theology that many label hyper-Calvinism.

## RELEVANT ASPECTS OF JOHN GILL'S SOTERIOLOGY

### *Eternal Justification*

The time in which Gill ministered, often labeled the "Age of Reason," witnessed considerable theological upheavals, and Gill was, overall, troubled by these changes. He believed that the era's strong commitment to rationalism created theologies that deemphasized the necessity of divine grace. The popularity of such theologies—most notably various forms of deism and the theology of Daniel Whitby—pushed him into a defensive position.<sup>7</sup>

Gill responded by creating a theology that sought to magnify divine

grace. He feared any position that resembled synergism, and he constructed a theological system that took “the entire economy of salvation up into eternity” and “rendered it impervious to the will of the creature.”<sup>8</sup> Such a move provided Gill a way to speak of salvation in a manner that allowed for minimal human participation.

In Gill’s system, election creates an eternal union between the elect and God. Gill believed that just as election “flows from the love of God” eternally, so “there must of course be an union to Him so early.” Eternal union is therefore an “eternal immanent act in God” in which there is “the going forth of his heart in love to them [i.e., the elect], thereby uniting them to himself.”<sup>9</sup>

Such a union is possible because election creates for the elect an eternal “being in Christ, a kind of subsistence in him.” This is not an actual being, an *esse actu*, but a representative being, an *ess representativum*. Through this representation, the elect “are capable of having grants of grace made to them in Christ.” Gill cited texts such as 2 Timothy 1:9 and Ephesians 1:3 to support his position. He noted that such verses claim the elect are “blessed with all spiritual blessings in him, and that before the world began” and contended that the reception of such spiritual blessings requires an eternal union between the elect and Christ.<sup>10</sup>

The *pactum salutis* explains how the elect are able to receive these spiritual blessings in this eternal union. In an agreement between the members of the Trinity, the Son promised to serve as surety for the elect; that is, he pledged to atone for their sins at the time of the Father’s choosing. The Son’s promise to do so was so secure that the Father applied the benefits of the atonement to the elect within the eternal union, before Christ’s actual death on the cross.<sup>11</sup>

Gill highlighted two particular spiritual blessings the elect receive in this union—eternal adoption and eternal justification. Of these, eternal justification received the majority of his attention. He claimed that it is

an immanent act in God, it is an act of his grace towards them [i.e., the elect], is wholly without them, entirely resides in the divine mind, and lies in his estimating, accounting, and constituting them righteous, through the righteousness of his Son; and, as such, did not first commence in time, but from eternity.<sup>12</sup>

Therefore, for Gill, justification begins not at the moment a person exercises faith or even at the moment of Christ’s death on the cross. It is an immanent

and eternal act of God.

Though the elect are justified from eternity, before their faith in Christ and their conversion they are unaware of their justification. For this reason, Gill made a distinction between active justification and passive justification. Active justification, or justification *in foro Dei*, is “strictly and properly justification.” It is eternal justification, justification as an immanent and eternal act of God. Passive justification, or justification *in foro conscientiae*, is “declarative to and upon the conscience of the believer.”<sup>13</sup> It occurs in time. Active justification is therefore what one should consider true justification; it is God’s declaration that the elect are righteous in his sight. Passive justification, on the other hand, is merely one’s personal recognition that one has been eternally justified.

In this scheme, active justification is the form of justification that precedes conversion and regeneration in the *ordo salutis*. It also precedes faith. God justifies the elect from eternity, and this fact is true regardless of whether the elect have yet to place their faith in Christ’s atoning work. Gill wrote, “Faith adds nothing to the *esse*, only to the *bene esse* of justification; it is no part of, nor any ingredient in it; it is a complete act in the eternal mind of God, without the being or consideration of faith.”<sup>14</sup> Admitting that some biblical texts appear to place faith prior to justification in the *ordo salutis*, he explained, “What scriptures may be thought to speak of faith, as a prerequisite to justification, cannot be understood as speaking of it as a prerequisite to the being of justification; for faith has no causal influence upon it, it adds nothing to its being, it is no ingredient in it, it is not the cause nor matter of it.”<sup>15</sup>

Only in relation to passive justification, the *bene esse* of one’s justification, does faith have relevance. Texts that connect faith and justification “can only be understood as speaking of faith as a prerequisite to the knowledge and comfort of it.”<sup>16</sup> Faith in Christ is therefore only necessary to obtain the assurance that one is justified; it is not necessary for one’s actual justification.

While presenting justification in such a manner is unconventional, Gill personally saw great value in his position. Primarily, he believed that it preserved sovereign grace by completely divorcing justification from human effort. The elect do not exercise faith to receive justification; God simply declares them justified through their eternal union with Christ. Gill remarked, “Justification is an act of God’s grace towards us, *is wholly without us*, entirely resides in the divine mind, and lies in his estimation, accounting and constituting us righteous.”<sup>17</sup>

Gill even delighted in the fact that his position upended a more traditional understanding of justification by faith. He used harsh language to describe the traditional position, fearing that it would lead to the synergistic forms of salvation that he so often combatted. In a defense of eternal justification and eternal union presented to Abraham Taylor, he registered his disagreement with theologians who espoused the traditional perspective and questioned why they would hold to such a position. He wrote,

It is generally said that they [the elect] are not united to Christ until they believe, and that the bond of union is the Spirit on Christ's part, and faith on ours. I am ready to think that these phrases are taken up by divines, one from another, without a thorough consideration of them...Why must this union be pieced up with faith on our part? This smells so prodigious rank of self, that one may justly suspect that something rotten and nauseous lies at the bottom of it.<sup>18</sup>

He followed this statement with a lengthy argument that sought to overturn the traditional understanding of justification by faith.<sup>19</sup>

### ***Gospel Offers and Duty Faith***

Gill was a systematic theologian who operated in the style of the seventeenth-century Protestant scholastic theologians he admired, and as such he desired a coherent theological system.<sup>20</sup> His desire for doctrinal consistency led him to shape his understanding of evangelism in accordance with his convictions about eternal justification. Here in his thought, one finds strong denials of Gospel offers and duty faith.

Concerning the offer of the Gospel, Gill wrote,

The gospel is not tendered to the elect, but is *the power of God unto salvation* to them. The grace of God is bestowed upon them, applied to them, and wrought in them, but not offered. And as for the non-elect, grace is neither offered to them, nor bestowed on them, and therefore there can be no falsehood or hypocrisy, dissimulation or guile, nothing ludicrous or delusory in the divine conduct towards them, or anything which disproves God's act of preterition or reprobation.<sup>21</sup>

Gill provided two reasons for his rejection of Gospel offers in this statement. In regard to the elect, he feared that an offer of the Gospel might suggest that

the elect must do something to obtain salvation. An offer might imply that a response is required. Rather than receiving an offer of the Gospel, the elect should instead realize that salvation is “bestowed upon them” in eternity.

In relation to the non-elect, Gill claimed that an offer of the Gospel does not comport with the doctrine of reprobation. Put simply, how might one offer the Gospel openly to all people when not all people are the recipients of saving grace? Gill therefore believed that universal offers of grace are insincere, both on the part of ministers who make the offers and, ultimately, on the part of God.

Rejecting Gospel offers, Gill preferred instead to speak of two distinct Gospel callings. An external call, which he described as the ministry of the word, goes out to all who have access to special revelation. It presents the Gospel message. On its own, however, it is incapable of granting salvation. For salvation to occur, one must receive an internal call, a drawing from the Holy Spirit. Such a calling goes to the elect only, often though not always in conjunction with the ministry of the word.<sup>22</sup> It is effectual.

While this distinction between internal and external calling is not unique to Gill, it is interesting to note how his theology of eternal justification shaped his understanding of these two callings. The internal call goes only “to such who have a work of grace already begun in them.”<sup>23</sup> With this statement, Gill referred to the fact that the elect, even before the internal calling of the Spirit, are the recipients of such spiritual blessings as eternal justification. The internal call therefore assists them in realizing their justified status by leading them to place their faith in Christ, thereby granting them passive justification. It also directs them to attend to the means of grace so that they might grow in sanctification.

Those who receive only the external call, by contrast, have no certain hope of salvation. They receive information about the Gospel as revealed in the ministry of the word but, lacking any internal call of the Gospel, do not know whether they have been eternally justified. They gain no assurance from the external call.<sup>24</sup>

Most important, the internal call, given as it is to those who are already justified, carries with it an obligation to “not only to the means of grace, but to partake of the blessings of grace.” By contrast, the external call lacks such an obligation. Given to sinners in a “state of nature and unregeneracy,” it is not

a call to them to regenerate and convert themselves, of which there is no instance; and which is the pure work of the Spirit of God: nor to make their peace with God, which they cannot make by any thing they can do; and which is only made by the blood of Christ: nor to get an interest in Christ, which is not got, but given: nor to the exercise of evangelical grace, which they have not, and therefore can never exercise: nor to any spiritual vital acts, which they are incapable of, being natural men and dead in trespasses and sins.<sup>25</sup>

This distinction between callings is vital; it demonstrates Gill's denial of duty faith.

The external call only obliges its recipients to perform the "natural duties of religion; to a natural faith." These duties include such activities as giving mental assent to the truths of the Gospel; the avoidance of sin, which Gill stated "even the light of nature dictates;" and prayers of gratitude. It also obliges its recipients to "the outward means of grace, and to make use of them." Describing these outward means of grace, Gill explained that they involved a duty "to read the holy scriptures, which have been the means of the conversion of some; to hear the word, and wait on the ministry of it, which may be blessed unto them, for the effectual calling of them." He further explained that, by attending to the means of grace, recipients of the external call receive an understanding of the Gospel and then the "the whole" will be left "to the Spirit of God, to make application of it as he shall think fit."<sup>26</sup>

In short, the external call directs its recipients to moral reform and religious activities so that they might potentially later receive an internal call. It does not explicitly issue a command to exercise faith in Christ; it only calls recipients to receive the ministry of the word so that they "might wait on the ministry of it." As they wait, God may make application of the external call—that is, God may provide an internal call of the Gospel—as "he shall think fit."

One might wonder what value the external call has if it does not oblige its recipients to come to faith in Christ. Gill answered this question by pointing some of the positive benefits it might convey. He stated that by it, many

become more civilised, and more moral in their conversation, are reformed, as to their outward manners; and through a speculative knowledge of the gospel, escape the grosser pollutions of the world; and others are brought by it to a

temporary faith, to believe for a while, to embrace the gospel notionally, to submit to the ordinances of it, make a profession of religion, by which means they become serviceable to support the interest of it.<sup>27</sup>

Therefore, though it “comports with the wisdom of God that there should be such an outward call of many who are not internally called,” the external call can at least create a notional faith, and this faith can benefit individuals and even the broader society.<sup>28</sup>

### ***Sensible Sinners and Repentance***

While Gill’s position on these matters seems sufficiently clear, two additional aspects of his thought merit brief attention because they further elucidate his convictions. When discussing the doctrine of repentance, he made a sharp division between legal repentance and evangelical repentance. Legal repentance involves only outward moral reform. According to Gill, the citizens of Nineveh during the ministry of Jonah illustrated this type of repentance. Although they temporarily modified their behavior, they experienced no lasting spiritual change, and they eventually suffered divine judgment. By contrast, evangelical repentance operates by divine grace. It is given only to the elect, and it assists them as they turn from sin as they receive passive justification.<sup>29</sup>

Gill made use of this distinction because it allowed him to account for Scripture passages that appear to call all people to repent and turn to God with saving faith. Given his denial of Gospel offers and duty faith, he could not recognize such universal calls to repentance, so he frequently claimed in his polemical writings and even in his biblical commentaries that broad calls to repentance were merely calls for individual or corporate moral reform, not calls pertaining to personal salvation.<sup>30</sup>

In order to preserve consistency with his convictions, then, he claimed that those who receive an external call have an obligation only to legal repentance, not to evangelical repentance.<sup>31</sup> They have no obligation to repent and trust Christ in a saving way; they must only modify their behavior and await an internal call. Only when they receive the internal call that assures them that they are one of the elect are they responsible for evangelical repentance.

Gill also made a distinction between sensible sinners and non-elect sinners. He defined sensible sinners as elect people who have experienced

regeneration but who have yet to receive full assurance. They are aware of their own sinfulness due to divine grace, and they are actively seeking a sense of passive justification in order to receive assurance. Sinners who are not among the elect, by contrast, are not the recipients of any spiritual blessings from God. They are therefore not fully aware of their need for justification because God has not revealed to them their sinful condition.

Gill stated that while he knew of “no exhortations to dead sinners [that is, the non-elect], to return and live” in Scripture, he acknowledged that pastors should “encourage and exhort sensible sinners to believe in Christ.”<sup>32</sup> This statement merits attention because with it Gill maintained his conviction that offering the Gospel is inappropriate. He recommended here only that pastors exhort sensible sinners to trust in Christ. He did not instruct them to offer salvation to sensible sinners.

Even more important, though, is the fact that with this statement Gill also revealed that he was not comfortable exhorting listeners to respond positively to the Gospel if he deemed them not elect. Careful readers will note that he claimed that he knew of no exhortations to trust the Gospel going out to uninterested or dead sinners and stated that one should provide Gospel exhortations only to sensible sinners.

Such a position often made Gill unwilling to recognize universal exhortations to trust the Gospel, even when he found such exhortations in Scripture. Throughout his body of works and even in his sermons, he frequently interpreted universal calls to salvation as calls given only to sensible sinners and not calls given to all people.<sup>33</sup> This fact demonstrates just how chastened a view of evangelism he possessed.

### **Summary**

Gill desired to remove human participation from the act of salvation. He therefore constructed a theological system in which justification occurs as an immanent and eternal act of God. This system led him to reject the more traditional understanding of justification by faith. For Gill, faith only allows one to become aware of one’s justified status; it is not a condition for the reception of actual justification. In his practical theology, he denied universal offers of the Gospel and even denied the legitimacy of duty faith. He formulated his convictions about sensible sinners, external and internal calls of the Gospel, and evangelical and legal repentance in light of this

rejection of both Gospel offers and duty faith.

In Gill's understanding of evangelism, therefore, one makes a proclamation of the Gospel, an external call. Those who are already justified receive an internal call as they hear the Gospel proclaimed, and this internal call reveals to them that they need passive justification. Such people are sensible sinners. An evangelist can exhort these sensible sinners to trust in Christ to receive passive justification but cannot offer them salvation. In contrast, the non-elect receive only the external call to the Gospel and are obligated to perform only legal repentance—outward moral reform—and attend to the means of grace in the hopes that they might later receive an inward call to salvation. In Gill's system, one neither offers them the Gospel nor exhorts them to trust in the Gospel and must profess that they have no duty to believe the Gospel.

### **ASSESSING RECENT DEFENSES OF GILL**

Several noteworthy scholars attempt to defend Gill from the charge of hyper-Calvinism. The most significant are Thomas Nettles, Timothy George, and George Ella.<sup>34</sup> While their works display many commendable qualities, their contributions do suffer from a failure to appreciate just how Gill's soteriology shaped his understanding of Gospel preaching.

#### ***Thomas Nettles***

Nettles' research on Gill centers around two key publications. In *By His Grace and For His Glory*, a work that features his first significant published work on Gill, Nettles rightly acknowledges that Gill did not believe in the free offer of the Gospel.<sup>35</sup> However, he does claim that Gill "affirmed that it was the duty of all men to repent of sin and the duty of all who heard the Gospel to believe it."<sup>36</sup> He contends that this fact frees Gill from the charge of hyper-Calvinism.

In claiming that Gill did not deny duty faith, Nettles does not sufficiently explore Gill's soteriology. Though he surveys some aspects of Gill's thought—Gill's ordering of the divine decrees, his understanding of sanctification, and his pastoral ministry practices—he fails to probe Gill's desire to frame salvation as an eternal act of God that requires minimal human participation. Most notably, he does not address the doctrine of eternal

justification in a significant manner even though it was a key component of Gill's theological project.

This neglect causes Nettles to misrepresent Gill on the matter of duty faith. For example, Nettles cites a passage from Gill's *Cause of God and Truth* that he admits *prima facie* appears to deny duty faith. Gill wrote, "God does not require all men to believe in Christ; where he does it is according to the revelation he makes of them."<sup>37</sup> Nettles tries to soften the implications of this statement by arguing that Gill intended only "to highlight man's responsibility for that which is available to him."<sup>38</sup> Per Nettles, Gill wrote merely about those who have no access to the Gospel. He argued that such people are responsible only for what they receive through general revelation.

Though Gill indeed addressed this particular topic in this passage, Nettles leaves unaddressed the next sentence in Gill's work. There Gill wrote, "Those who only have the outward ministry of the word, unattended with the special illuminations of the Spirit of God, are obliged to believe no further than the external revelation they enjoy, reaches."<sup>39</sup> Put simply, Gill indeed stated that people only have a responsibility for the revelation that they receive; those who receive no access to the Gospel are accountable only for the general revelation that they have, but those who receive only the external call are obligated only to perform legal repentance and not trust in Christ for salvation. Gill makes this point even more explicit in the subsequent sentences in which he contrasts the mere legal obligations attending the external call with the salvific obligations attending the internal call. Nettles' argument, then, takes Gill out of context. It does so because Nettles has not sufficiently explored Gill's work on the external and internal callings as well as the soteriological convictions that undergird them.

In a subsequent publication, Nettles attempts to associate Gill with those who participated in the Evangelical Revival. A lack of adequate attention to Gill's soteriology also appears here, however, when Nettles implies several times that Gill held to the traditional understanding of justification by faith rather than the more eccentric position of eternal justification. This fact is troubling given Gill's repeated protestations against justification by faith.<sup>40</sup>

Most interesting is the fact that in this publication Nettles nuances his earlier defense of Gill. He admits, "There is a central point, however, in which he [Gill] appears to hold the [h]yper-Calvinist view [regarding duty faith]." He offers as evidence a quote from Gill's sermon entitled *Faith in God and*

*His Word* in which Gill claimed, “Man never had in his power to have or to exercise [faith in Christ], no, not even in the state of innocence.” Nettles then admits, “*Theoretically*, Gill held that the non-elect were not obligated to evangelical obedience, because the necessity of such obedience did not exist in unfallen humanity as deposited in Adam.”<sup>41</sup>

Surprisingly, despite this admission, Nettles remains cautious about labeling Gill a hyper-Calvinist, and he does not retract his earlier claim that Gill affirmed duty faith. He even continues to praise Gill, arguing that Gill’s works exhibit “the central concerns and zeal of the Great Awakening.”<sup>42</sup>

Nettles does so because he claims that Gill was only *theoretically* a hyper-Calvinist. He argues that in Gill’s scheme “while many [people] exhibit . . . only a legal repentance and a historical faith, and the non-elect may not be theoretically obligated to the ‘faith of God’s elect,’ ministers of the Gospel preach repentance and faith in a Gospel way.”<sup>43</sup> Nettles reduces his argument to the contention that, even though Gill denied all people have an obligation to respond to the Gospel, at the practical level he still preached the Gospel, and this fact means that his hyper-Calvinism was merely hypothetical.

I have the utmost respect for Nettles and his contribution to Baptist scholarship, but I find this argument is unpersuasive. As noted, Gill’s commentaries and sermons reveal that his soteriological convictions often caused him to interpret Scripture in such a way that he minimized universal calls to respond to the Gospel. Such an act displays that he held his principles at more than just a theoretical level; they regularly affected his preaching and exposition of Scripture.

The differences between Gill’s ministry and that of the evangelists of the Evangelical Revival, those to whom Nettles wishes to compare Gill, are therefore stark. Gill constructed a ministry philosophy that emphasized encouraging only sensible sinners to respond to the Gospel and often eschewed giving Gospel exhortations to all people. The evangelists of the Evangelical Revival did not.

With Nettles, then, readers find a contradictory portrayal of Gill. While throughout his works Nettles maintains that Gill denied Gospel offers, in one work he claims that Gill did not deny that all people have an obligation to respond to the Gospel. In another, without retracting this claim, he admits that Gill likely held to the hyper-Calvinist tenet of denying duty faith. He deems this point irrelevant, though, and incorrectly believes that it did not shape

Gill's ministry. Nettles could have avoided these errors by more completely examining how deeply Gill's soteriology formed his thought and practice.

### ***Timothy George***

Out of all of Gill's defenders, the respected Baptist theologian Timothy George offers the most interesting arguments, yet he is also the most restrained in his praise of Gill. While he does not label Gill a hyper-Calvinist, he holds this conclusion rather tentatively, and in several places admits that Gill's theology possessed unhelpful tendencies.<sup>44</sup>

He especially criticizes the dangers posed by Gill's doctrine of eternal justification. He writes that with eternal justification Gill stressed the "priority of justification over faith," that "the doctrine was a stumbling block to many who could not square it with the necessity of conversion as a personal experience of grace," and that it was a "perilous teaching, insofar as it encouraged sinners to think of themselves as actually justified regardless of their personal response to Christ and the Gospel." The Second London Confession, a document that drew heavily from the Westminster Confession of Faith, explicitly rejected eternal justification, and George remarks, "Happily, on this controversial issue most Particular Baptists followed the fathers of the Second London Confession rather than John Gill."<sup>45</sup>

George's willingness to address Gill's statements on eternal justification is commendable. Unfortunately, he fails to explore how Gill's stance on eternal justification shaped his understanding of duty faith and evangelism. George does not address the concept of duty faith in Gill's thought, a disappointing omission in an otherwise excellent essay. He also neglects Gill's statements on such matters as evangelical repentance and sensible sinners, convictions that originated primarily from Gill's doctrine of eternal justification.

One receives the impression in George's work that Gill proclaimed the Gospel clearly with no constraint; however, by not connecting Gill's doctrine of eternal justification to its implications for evangelism, such a portrayal is not entirely accurate. In one place, George quotes from an ordination sermon that he claims demonstrates Gill's healthy evangelistic ministry. During the sermon, Gill charged the ministry candidate,

Souls sensible to sin and danger, and who are crying out, What shall we do to be saved? you are to observe, and point out Christ the tree of life to them; and

say...Believe on the Lord Jesus Christ and thou shalt be saved, Acts 16:31. Your work is to lead men, under a sense of sin and guilt, to the blood of Christ, shed for many for the remission of sin, and in this name you are to preach the forgiveness to them.<sup>46</sup>

Such a quote does not demonstrate what George desires. One should note to whom Gill instructs the young ministry candidate to direct his evangelistic appeals—to “souls *sensible* to sin and danger.” One therefore finds Gill’s doctrine of sensible sinners on full display.

George goes on to point to additional passages in which Gill warned young ministers that if they did not preach Christ, the blood of their listeners would be on their hands. He further cites a citation from Gill’s *The Cause of God and Truth* in which Gill stated that ministers are to “preach the gospel of salvation to all men, and declare, that whosoever believes shall be saved: for this they are commissioned to do.”<sup>47</sup>

While one can express gratitude for Gill’s willingness to call ministers to preach the Gospel, when assessing such quotations one must remember Robert Oliver’s helpful remarks on Gill’s preaching. Oliver explains that a

cause of confusion arises from the popular view that hyper-Calvinists are never concerned for the salvation of sinners...Gill was one [who possessed such a concern] and examples can be produced of him expressing a concern for such and pressing those who *were awakened* to turn and seek salvation. His hyper-Calvinism appears in the absence of direct exhortations and appeals to the unconverted to turn from their sin in repentance and cast themselves upon Christ.<sup>48</sup>

Oliver rightly explains that the preaching of the Gospel is not the issue in the debate over Gill’s hyper-Calvinism; hyper-Calvinists such as Joseph Hussey and John Brine both preached the Gospel. Instead, the issue is how one understands Gospel offers and duty faith as well as the accompanying doctrines of sensible sinners and evangelical repentance. Considering this fact, merely pointing Gill’s charge to preach the Gospel is not sufficient.

In fact, one must receive Gill’s call to “preach the gospel of salvation to all men, and declare, that whosoever believes shall be saved” within its proper context. That statement appears in a work that contains some of the strongest statements against the legitimacy of Gospel offers and duty faith

in Gill's corpus. In the very sentence from which George draws this quote, Gill denied Gospel offers by writing that the Gospel minister "ought not to offer and tender salvation to any." Even more troubling, in the sentences immediately preceding it, Gill denied duty faith when he wrote, "None are bound to believe in Christ, but such to whom a revelation of him is made and according to the revelation is the faith they are obliged to." He explained that people who "have only an external revelation of him by the ministry of the word"—that is, people who hear the Gospel preached through the external call but do not receive an internal call of the Spirit—are required to believe "no more than is included in that revelation, as that Jesus is the Son of God, the Messiah, who died and rose again, and is the Saviour of sinners &c., but not that he died for them, or that he is their Saviour."<sup>49</sup> The external call can only obligate its recipients to give mental assent to the truth of the Gospel; apart from the internal call the preaching of the Gospel cannot appeal for any person to exercise faith.

One can likely account for George's misreading of Gill by noting that, for his statements on Gill's convictions on evangelism, he relies heavily on the work of Thomas Nettles.<sup>50</sup> As demonstrated, Nettles does not address Gill's doctrine of eternal justification in a significant manner, and this fact leads him to misinterpret Gill's convictions about evangelism. Though George explores Gill's doctrine of eternal justification and rightly sees its dangers, when he assesses Gill's evangelistic practices he relies on a source that does not do so, and the incorporation of the Nettles material gives George's presentation of Gill an unbalanced feel. George is right on Gill's understanding of eternal justification, but he is wrong in assuming that eternal justification had no relevance for Gill's understating of Gospel proclamation.

George's strong reliance on Nettles becomes especially evident in the several instances in which he uses Nettles to assert that Gill held to different convictions than Joseph Hussey, a man whom George considers a genuine hyper-Calvinist.<sup>51</sup> Nettles' chief argument for distancing Gill from Hussey is his contention that Gill did not consistently argue that prelapsarian Adam possessed an inability to believe the Gospel. Nettles identifies this understanding of Adamic inability as one of hyper-Calvinism's key features. He appears to assume that if Gill did not hold to an important hyper-Calvinist tenet associated with Hussey that Gill might remain free from the charge of hyper-Calvinism.

This comparison with Hussey has little relevance, however, because Hussey never explicitly argued for Adam's incapacity to believe the Gospel. That teaching arrived later in the hyper-Calvinist controversy, primarily around the time of the Modern Question debate. Hussey's hyper-Calvinism originated instead from a commitment to eternal justification—interestingly, the same theological position that powered Gill's hyper-Calvinism.

### **George Ella**

George Ella is perhaps the most passionate of Gill's defenders. Interestingly, though Ella expresses great displeasure with those who label Gill a hyper-Calvinist, in his most recent work he does not deny the fact that Gill rejected Gospel offers and duty faith. Ella therefore helps to confirm—and does not disprove—that Gill held to such convictions. In addition, Ella holds convictions similar to Gill's, and he presents Gill as a model for contemporary pastors to emulate, hoping that they too will reject Gospel offers and duty faith.<sup>52</sup> The question raised by Ella's work, then, becomes that of normativity—is the no-offer, no-duty faith position normative, or does it represent a departure from traditional Reformed soteriology and deserve a descriptor such as hyper-Calvinism? The latter is correct, and throughout his works Ella does not convincingly demonstrate the contrary.

### **CONCLUSION**

John Gill offered a soteriology that magnified the role of divine grace and minimized the significance of human action. His doctrine of eternal justification illustrates this fact well. Gill's soteriology led him to deny the legitimacy of Gospel offers and duty faith, and recent attempts to argue otherwise remain unpersuasive. Gill's final position, then, accords well with the theology that many of his critics label hyper-Calvinism.

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1. This article is an expanded version of David Mark Rathel, "Was John Gill a Hyper-Calvinist?: Determining Gill's Theological Identity," *Baptist Quarterly* 48, no. 1 (2017): 47–59. I express here my gratitude to the editors of *Baptist Quarterly* and to Taylor and Francis Publishing for their willingness to have it republished and to Stephen J. Wellum and Michael A. G. Haykin for accepting it in *The Southern Baptist Journal of Theology*. I also express appreciation to Dr. Stephen R. Holmes, my supervising professor, for his feedback during the construction of this paper.

2. For a brief introduction to Gill's ministry and influence, consider Timothy George, "John Gill," in *Theologians of the Baptist Tradition*, eds. Timothy George and David Dockery (Nashville, TN: B&H, 2001), 11–33.
3. The most significant work yet published on Gill illustrates this disagreement; it contains articles by respected Gill interpreters who argue for both readings. See Michael A. G. Haykin, ed., *The Life and Thought of John Gill (1697–1771): A Tercentennial Appreciation* (Leiden: Brill, 1997). The phrase hyper-Calvinist is not one without ambiguity, but it often appears in the literature related to Gill to describe his alleged denial of Gospel offers and duty faith. I employ it here for this reason.
4. George M. Ella, "John Gill and the Charge of Hyper-Calvinism," *Baptist Quarterly* 36, no. 4 (1995), 160–170.
5. Though offering an interesting account of the development of hyper-Calvinism, Peter Toon associates Gill with hyper-Calvinism primarily because of Gill's personal relationships with hyper-Calvinist leaders, not his theology. Peter Toon, *The Emergence of Hyper-Calvinism in English Nonconformity, 1689–1765* (London: Olive Tree, 1967; repr., Eugene: Wipf & Stock, 2011), 96–100. Many surveys of Baptist history connect Gill with hyper-Calvinism due to an alleged supralapsarianism. E.g., J. M. Cramp, *Baptist History* (London: Elliot Stock, 1868), 477; Henry C. Vedder, *A Short History of the Baptists* (Valley Forge: Judson, 1907), 239–241; A. C. Underwood, *A History of the English Baptists* (London: Baptist Union, 1947), 134–135; H. Leon McBeth, *The Baptist Heritage: Four Centuries of Baptist Witness* (Nashville, TN: B&H, 1987), 177–178. This assessment is not correct; Gill was not a staunch supralapsarian. See John Gill, *A Complete Body of Doctrinal and Practical Divinity*, 2 vols. (New ed.; London: Tegg & Company, 1839), 1:261–265; idem., *A Collection of Sermons and Tracts*, 3 vols. (London: George Keith, 1778), 2:73. Curt Daniel, author of the most extensive research on Gill thus far, correctly interprets much of Gill's thought, but he determines that Gill was a hyper-Calvinist in part because of a contrast Daniel draws between Gill and Calvin. Curt D. Daniel, "Hyper-Calvinism and John Gill" (PhD diss., The University of Edinburgh, 1983), x, 1–40. Not all have found Daniel's approach convincing. See Hong-Gyu Park, "Grace and Nature in John Gill (1697–1771)" (PhD diss., The University of Aberdeen, 2001), 286–287; Richard A. Muller, "John Gill and the Reformed Tradition: A Study in the Reception of Protestant Orthodoxy in the Eighteenth-Century" in *The Life and Thought of John Gill (1697–1771): A Tercentennial Appreciation*, ed. Michael A.G. Haykin (New York: Brill, 1997), 52.
6. Many convictions contributed to Gill's final soteriological position. I choose to highlight eternal justification here because Gill often emphasized it and because it played an important role in shaping his understanding of evangelism. For works that highlight the significance of Gill's doctrine of eternal justification, see Michael A. G. Haykin, "Remembering Baptist Heroes: The Example of John Gill," in *Ministry By His Grace and For His Glory: Essays in Honor of Thomas J. Nettles*, eds. Thomas K. Ascol and Nathan A. Finn (Cape Coral, FL: Founders Press, 2011), 17–37; R. Philip Roberts, *Continuity and Change: London Calvinistic Baptists and the Evangelical Revival, 1760–1820* (Wheaton: Richard Owen Roberts, 1989), 40–41; Alan P. F. Sell, *The Great Debate: Calvinism, Arminianism and Salvation* (Grand Rapids, MI: Baker, 1982; repr. Eugene: Wipf & Stock, 1998), 85; Peter Naylor, *Picking Up a Pin for the Lord: English Particular Baptists from 1688 to the Early Nineteenth Century* (London: Grace, 1992), 150.
7. For a survey of the deism's influence during Gill's time, see Alan P. F. Sell, *Enlightenment, Ecumenism, Evangel: Theological Themes and Thinkers, 1550–2000* (Milton Keynes: Paternoster, 2005), 112–131. Gill famously argued against Whitby in John Gill, *The Cause of God and Truth* (New ed.; London: Thomas Tegg and Son, 1838).
8. Richard A. Muller, "The Spirit and the Covenant: John Gill's Critique of the *Pactum Salutis*," *Foundations*, 24 no. 1 (1981), 12.
9. Gill, *Complete Body*, 1:284–285. See also Gill's explanation of the connection between unconditional election and eternal justification in one of his earliest works, a sermon on Acts 13:39 published under the title *The Doctrine of Justification in Gill*, *Collection of Sermons and Tracts*, 3:167ff.
10. Gill, *Complete Body*, 1:286. One wishes that Gill had further clarified his statements about the elect possessing an eternal subsistence in Christ. Unfortunately, he did not do so. One can find other remarks on this subject in Gill, *Collection of Sermons and Tracts*, 2:88; 3:168.
11. See Gill, *Complete Body*, 1:293. For work on Gill's doctrine of the *pactum salutis*, see David Mark Rathel, "Innovating the Covenant of Redemption: John Gill and the History of Redemption as Mere Shadow" (paper presented at the Annual Meeting of the Evangelical Theological Society, San Antonio, Texas, 15 November 2016).
12. Gill, *Complete Body*, 1:292. For a helpful exposition of Gill's theology of eternal justification, consider Oliver D. Crisp, *Deviant Calvinism: Broadening Reformed Theology* (Minneapolis: Fortress, 2014), 41–70.
13. This statement appears in *The Doctrine of Justification*. See Gill, *Collection of Sermons and Tracts*, 3:150.

14. Gill, *Complete Body*, 1:293.
15. *Ibid.*, 298.
16. *Ibid.*
17. This statement appears in *The Doctrine of Justification*. See Gill, *Collection of Sermons and Tracts*, 3:167. Italics added.
18. This statement appears in Gill's tract entitled *The Doctrines of God's Everlasting Love to His Elect*. See Gill, *Collection of Sermons and Tracts*, 3:198. For background on the exchange between Taylor and Gill, see Alan P. F. Sell, *Hinterland Theology: A Stimulus to Theological Construction* (Milton Keynes: Paternoster, 2008), 57–61
19. Gill, *Collection of Sermons and Tracts*, 3:198–203. Gill provided a similar argument against a more traditional understanding of justification by faith in his systematic theology. See Gill, *Complete Body*, 3:292–294.
20. For Gill's indebtedness to the Reformed scholastic tradition, consider Muller, "John Gill and the Reformed Tradition: A Study in the Reception of Protestant Orthodoxy in the Eighteenth-Century," 51–68.
21. Gill, *Cause of God and Truth*, 289. Italics original. Gill offered several statements in his works that condemned the legitimacy of Gospel offers. Perhaps the most famous appeared in a polemical piece directed at John Wesley entitled *The Doctrine of Predestination Stated*. See Gill, *Collection of Sermons and Tracts*, 3:269–270.
22. Gill mused that it would be possible for the elect to receive an effectual internal call to salvation without also receiving an external call. For his statements on this issue as well as his most thorough treatment of the internal and external calls, see Gill, *Complete Body*, 2:121–127.
23. Gill, *Complete Body*, 2:122.
24. This is the logical outflow of Gill's position, and he developed it in Gill, *Complete Body*, 2:121–131. See also the section in *The Cause of God and Truth* in which Gill addressed conditional statements in preaching, that is, statements such as, "If you will repent, you will receive forgiveness." Concerning these statements and their relationship to the external call, Gill wrote, "I utterly deny that there is any promise of pardon made to the non-elect at all, not on any condition whatever." This fact means that no hope of assurance can emerge from the external call in and of itself. See Gill, *Cause of God and Truth*, 39.
25. Gill, *Complete Body*, 2:122.
26. *Ibid.*, 122–123.
27. *Ibid.*, 124.
28. *Ibid.*
29. For Gill's distinction between legal and evangelical repentance, see Gill, *Complete Body*, 2:368–371. See also *The Doctrines of God's Everlasting Love to the Elect* in Gill, *Collection of Sermons and Tracts*, 3:226–227. One should not confuse Gill's usage of these terms with that found in the work of John Calvin or James B. Torrance. C.f., John Calvin, *Institutes of the Christian Religion* (trans. Henry Beveridge; Edinburgh: The Calvin Translation Society, 1845), 2:154–155; Andrew Torrance, "John Calvin and James B. Torrance's Evangelical Vision of Repentance," *Participatio*, 3 (2014): 126–147.
30. See, for example, Gill, *Cause of God and Truth*, 64, 66, 287, 294; John Gill, *An Exposition of the Old Testament* (London: Mathews and Leigh, 1810), 6:91.
31. Gill stated this explicitly in Gill, *Cause of God and Truth*, 307.
32. *Ibid.*, 317. Gill's usage of the term sensible sinners carried with it different connotations than that of Puritan theologians such as John Bunyan. C.f., John Bunyan, *A Discourse Upon the Pharisee and Publican*. (London: Blackie and Son, 1873), 187, 237.
33. See, for example, Gill, *Cause of God and Truth*, 38, 294, 317; Gill, *Complete Body*, 1:127, 531. It is revealing that Gill used the phrase sensible sinners 49 times in his New Testament commentaries and 80 times in his Old Testament commentaries. In many, though perhaps not all of these occurrences, he used the phrase to qualify what appear to be universal calls to respond to the Gospel. For example, when commenting on the apostolic preaching in Acts, he often stated that apostolic calls to receive salvation were given only to sensible sinners and not to all people. E.g., John Gill, *An Exposition of the New Testament* (London: Mathews and Leigh, 1809), 2:168.
34. I select these historians and theologians because they have published significant pieces on Gill. Three noteworthy research projects that have not yet received publication do merit brief comment, however. Clive Jarvis provides a defense of Gill in his doctoral thesis on Particular Baptist life in Northamptonshire, and his analysis of Gill's contribution relies heavily on the work of George Ella. By critiquing Ella's convictions in this article, I can also interact with many of the claims made by Jarvis. See Clive Jarvis, "Growth in English Baptist Churches: With Special Reference to the Northamptonshire Particular Baptist

- Association (1770–1830)” (PhD diss., The University of Glasgow, 2001), 53–60; idem., “The Myth of Hyper-Calvinism?,” in *Recycling the Past or Researching History?: Studies in Baptist Historiography and Myths*, ed. Philip E. Thompson and Anthony R. Cross (Studies in Baptist History and Thought, Volume 11; Carlisle: Paternoster, 2005), 231–263. Hong-Gyu Park offers hearty praise of Gill, but he focuses his research on such matters as Gill’s doctrine of revelation. He does not consider Gill’s soteriology or Gill’s understanding of evangelism at length; it is therefore difficult to consider his research a full defense of Gill against the charge of hyper-Calvinism. See Park, “Grace and Nature,” 30–74, 286–287. Park does fleetingly address Gill’s doctrine of the *pactum salutis*. For my interaction with his work on this topic, see David Mark Rathel, “Innovating the Covenant of Redemption,” 23–25. Jonathan White analyzes Gill’s rather complex relationship with hyper-Calvinism in his doctoral dissertation. Regrettably, White employs an unnecessarily limited definition of hyper-Calvinism. He defines it as “the denial of the duty of unregenerate man to believe the gospel for salvation based on man’s original lack of ability to believe the gospel for salvation.” See Jonathan Anthony White, “A Theological and Historical Examination of John Gill’s Soteriology in Relation to Eighteenth-Century Hyper-Calvinism” (PhD diss., The Southern Baptist Theological Seminary, 2010), 50. With this definition, White refers to the belief held by such figures as Joseph Hussey that prelapsarian Adam possessed no ability to believe the Gospel. White’s willingness to presuppose this definition when approaching Gill is unhelpful. Adamic inability was at best tangential to Gill’s theological system; yet, Gill did passionately argue against Gospel offers and duty faith. Doctrines such as eternal justification—not Adamic inability—motivated Gill’s understanding. White’s thesis unfortunately does not take this fact into account. For more information on Gill and Adamic inability, see footnote 41 in this article.
35. Thomas J. Nettles, *By His Grace and For His Glory: A Historical, Theological and Practical Study of the Doctrines of Grace in Baptist Life*, rev. ed. (Cape Coral, FL: Founders, 2006), 27–28, 47–48.
  36. *Ibid.*, 42.
  37. *Ibid.* This quotation originally appears in Gill, *The Cause of God and Truth*, 307
  38. Nettles, *By His Grace*, 42–43.
  39. Surprisingly, Nettles quotes this sentence but does not address it. See *Ibid.*, 42–44.
  40. See Tom J. Nettles, “John Gill and the Evangelical Awakening,” in *The Life and Thought of John Gill (1697–1771): A Tercentennial Appreciation*, eds. Michael A. G. Haykin (New York: Brill, 1997), 136–137. Here Nettles praises Gill for defending the doctrine of justification by faith, but the form of justification Gill emphasized in *The Law Established by the Gospel*, the sermon that Nettles cites, was eternal justification. Indeed, *The Law Established* is one of the strongest sermons on eternal justification in the Gill corpus. See Gill, *Collection of Sermons and Tracts*, 1:200–216. In addition, when comparing Gill to John Wesley, Nettles associates Gill’s understanding of justification with that of George Whitefield. See Nettles, “John Gill and the Evangelical Awakening,” 137n, 163. While Whitefield, like Gill, would have rejected some of Wesley’s convictions, Nettles makes no mention of the more unconventional aspects of Gill’s theology of justification. Whitefield would have brokered no agreement with those. E.g., Gilbert Tennent, an occasional critic of Whitefield, once correctly noted Whitefield’s rejection of eternal justification. See Thomas S. Kidd, *George Whitefield: America’s Spiritual Founding Founder* (New Haven: Yale, 2014), 196–197.
  41. Nettles, “John Gill and the Evangelical Awakening,” 153. Italics added. Proponents of the no-offer position—men such as Joseph Hussey—claimed that prelapsarian Adam had a no ability to believe the Gospel. Gill’s position on this matter is rather complex, but there is no doubt that he did at times affirm Adamic inability. See Gill, *Cause of God and Truth*, 307. Andrew Fuller offered helpful analysis of Gill’s rather contradictory statements concerning Adamic inability in Andrew Gunton Fuller, *The Complete Works of Andrew Fuller*, ed. Joseph Belcher. (Harrisonburg: Sprinkle Publications, 1988), 2:421.
  42. Nettles, “John Gill and the Evangelical Awakening,” 170.
  43. *Ibid.*, 154.
  44. George writes that the historic presentation of Gill as a hyper-Calvinist is “a hasty judgment that may need to be reconsidered.” Italics added. He further explains that, though he does not count Gill as a hyper-Calvinist in the vein of Hussey or Brine, “We cannot quite exonerate Gill of all responsibility in the fostering of an atmosphere in which the forthright promulgation of the missionary mandate of the church was seen to be a threat to, rather than an extension of, the gospel of grace.” George, “John Gill,” 28–29.
  45. *Ibid.*, 26–27.
  46. *Ibid.*, 28. This quote appears in Gill’s Sermon *The Doctrine of the Cherubim Opened and Explained*. See Gill, *Sermons and Tracts*, 2:36–37. George perhaps misses the full context of Gill’s statement because he draws the quote from a secondary source, Robinson’s Baptist Quarterly article. See George, “John

- Gill,” 28n. For Robinson’s article, see Olin C. Robinson, “The Legacy of John Gill,” *Baptist Quarterly* 24, no. 3 (1971): 111–125.
47. George, “John Gill,” 28. The original quote appears in Gill, *The Cause of God and Truth*, 303.
48. Robert Oliver, “John Gill,” in *The British Particular Baptists, 1638–1910*, ed. Michael A.G. Haykin (Springfield: Particular Baptist Press, 1998), 161–162. I have added italics to this quote to highlight the people for whom Gill expressed concern—those who “were awakened,” that is, those who were sensible sinners. See my remarks on Gill’s doctrine of sensible sinners in this article for more information.
49. Gill, *The Cause of God and Truth*, 303.
50. While George cites Nettles several times, he cites him twice in reference to Gill’s relationship with hyper-Calvinism. Both citations carry great weight in his argument. See George, “John Gill,” 28n, 29n.
51. *Ibid.*, 29n.
52. George M. Ella, *The Free Offer and The Call of the Gospel* (Durham: Go Publications, 2001), 51–53, 62, 66–67. Ella in one place calls those who espouse the Gospel offer position “highly liberal.” See *ibid.*, 23, 66. Compare Ella’s manner of defending Gill in these more recent works with the approach he took in his earlier pieces. See, for example, Ella, “John Gill and the Charge of Hyper-Calvinism,” 160–170; *idem.*, *John Gill and the Cause of God and Truth* (Durham: Go Publications, 1995); *idem.*, *John Gill and Justification from Eternity: A Tercentenary Appreciation (1697–1997)* (Durham: Go Publications, 1998). While Ella’s earlier research is marked by a different tone than his more recent writings, his earlier pieces do still unfortunately suffer from a failure to interpret Gill’s statements on eternal justification, sensible sinners, and the external call of the Gospel correctly. Contrast Ella’s conclusions with the conclusions I reach in this article.