

## John Gill and the Rule of Faith: A Case Study in the Baptist Retrieval of Tradition

David Rathel

*Gateway Baptist Theological Seminary, Ontario, CA*

**Abstract:** *This article explores the overlooked legacy of John Gill (1697–1771), an influential figure within eighteenth-century Particular Baptist circles. Central to the article’s argument is Gill’s deliberate utilization of the “regula fidei” (rule of faith) in his scriptural interpretation derived from the Apostles’ Creed and the theological debates of the fourth century. This approach positions Gill as a compelling exemplar for contemporary Baptists seeking to engage in theological retrieval. Despite occasional rhetorical criticisms of tradition, Gill’s pragmatic approach as an exegete and theologian reveals a nuanced methodology. He consistently referenced the works of early church theologians to enrich his own writings, demonstrating a belief in reading Scripture through the lens of the rule of faith—a condensed summary of gospel truths distilled from tradition. Gill’s endorsement of the reliability of the Apostles’ Creed further underscores its pertinence as a guiding framework for modern theological projects.*

**Key Words:** *Baptist theology, hermeneutics, historical theology, John Gill, rule of faith*

John Gill (1697–1771) was an influential eighteenth-century Particular Baptist minister. He pastored an important London church, a congregation that would generations later become the Metropolitan Tabernacle associated with Charles Haddon Spurgeon. He was the first Baptist to compose a commentary on every book of the Bible and likely the first Baptist to author a complete systematic theology.<sup>1</sup> Gill’s significant pulpit ministry and extensive publications afforded him tremendous influence not just over British Particular Baptists but also over North

American theologians. Citations of Gill’s works appear in the writings of Jonathan Edwards, J. L. Dagg, and William G. T. Shedd.<sup>2</sup>

Despite his labors, Gill does not often appear on lists documenting the Baptist tradition’s great luminaries. Perhaps two reasons account for this neglect. First, some readers perceive Gill’s writings as dense and inaccessible. Robert Hall once famously declared Gill’s works to be “a continent of mud.”<sup>3</sup> This sentiment has appeared not infrequently; for example, the Baptist historian Henry C. Vedder reflected that Gill’s biblical commentaries were “more learned than perspicuous.”<sup>4</sup> Second, many historians associate Gill with a virulent form of Reformed theology often known as high or hyper-Calvinism. This theological position denied gospel offers and duty faith and so departed from the traditional Baptist emphasis on evangelism.<sup>5</sup>

Recently, Gill’s proficient use of the tools associated with the Protestant scholastic method and deep engagement with the broader

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<sup>2</sup> See Jonathan Edwards, *The Freedom of the Will*, ed. Paul Ramsey (New Haven, CT: Yale University Press, 2019), 374; J. L. Dagg, *Manual of Theology, Second Part: A Treatise on Church Order* (Charleston: Southern Baptist Publication Society, 1859), 50; William G. T. Shedd, *Dogmatic Theology*, ed. Alan W. Gomes (Phillipsburg: P&R, 2003), 585, 636.

<sup>3</sup> This anecdote appears in *The Works of the Rev. Robert Hall*. The text summarizes a conversation between Robert Hall and Christmas Evans and reports that Rev. Hall “did not like Dr. Gill as an author. When Mr. Christmas Evans was in Bristol, he was talking to Mr. Hall about the Welch language, which he said was very copious and expressive. ‘How I wish, Mr. Hall, that Dr. Gill’s works had been written in Welch.’—‘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.’” Robert Hall, *The Works of the Rev. Robert Hall*, ed. Olinthus Gregory (New York: J & J Harper, 1833), 3:82.

<sup>4</sup> Henry C. Vedder, *A Short History of the Baptists* (Philadelphia: American Baptist Publication Society, 1907), 240.

<sup>5</sup> For a defense of Gill against the charge of hyper-Calvinism, consider George M. Ella, “John Gill and the Charge of Hyper-Calvinism,” *Baptist Quarterly* 36.4 (1995): 160–77; Tom J. Nettles, “John Gill and the Evangelical Awakening,” in *The Life and Thought of John Gill (1697–1771): A Tercentennial Appreciation*, ed. Michael A. G. Haykin (Leiden: Brill, 1997), 131–70. For a recent claim that Gill held to views associated with hyper-Calvinism, see David Mark Rathel, “John Gill and the Charge of Hyper-Calvinism: Assessing Contemporary Arguments in Defense of Gill in Light of Gill’s Doctrine of Eternal Justification,” *SBJT* 25.1 (2021): 43–62.

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<sup>1</sup> For a brief survey of Gill’s life and publishing legacy, consider the introduction to Gill found in Timothy George, “John Gill,” in *Theologians of the Baptist Tradition*, rev. ed., ed. Timothy George and David S. Dockery (Nashville: B&H Academic, 2001), 11–33.

Christian tradition has led to fresh readings of his works.<sup>6</sup> This new research into Gill is producing a positive reconsideration of his value to theologians—or at least a willingness to accept the portions of his writings that scholars do not perceive to be tainted by hyper-Calvinism.

This reassessment of Gill is long overdue. Many heroes of the Baptist tradition—for example, Daniel Taylor, Andrew Fuller, and Benjamin Keach—were primarily occasional theologians who published sermons and tracts designed to answer pressing pastoral questions or engage in the polemics of their day.<sup>7</sup> As valuable as such projects were, Gill authored an expansive collection of biblical commentaries and an erudite systematic theology. The Baptist tradition has not always produced such lengthy, deliberate works. To interact critically with Gill's corpus is to engage with an important part of Baptists' intellectual heritage.

With this essay, I demonstrate Gill's value to Baptist dogmatics by surveying his engagement with the broader Christian tradition. I contend that Gill deliberately drew from the church tradition in his scriptural interpretation and that his use of tradition can inform contemporary projects in theological retrieval.<sup>8</sup> Specifically, as Gill interpreted Scrip-

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<sup>6</sup> For Gill in relation to Protestant scholasticism, see Asselt who concluded that Gill was “one of the most important representatives of Reformed scholasticism in the eighteenth century” (Willem J. van Asselt, “Introduction to Reformed Scholasticism,” in *Introduction to Reformed Scholasticism*, ed. Willem J. van Asselt [Grand Rapids: Reformation Heritage, 2011], 179–80). For Gill's engagement with the broader Christian tradition, consider David Mark Rathel, “A Case Study in Baptist Catholicity: The Scriptures and the Tradition in the Theology of John Gill,” *Baptist Quarterly* 49.3 (2018): 108–16; Steven Tshombe Godet, “The Trinitarian Theology of John Gill (1697–1771): Context, Sources, and Controversy” (PhD diss., The Southern Baptist Theological Seminary, 2015), 122–80.

<sup>7</sup> Fuller did begin to write a systematic theology near the end of his life but was unable to complete the project before his death. See Andrew Fuller, “Letters on Systematic Divinity,” in *The Complete Works of Rev. Andrew Fuller*, ed. Andrew Gunton Fuller and Joseph Belcher (Harrisonburg: Sprinkle Publications, 1988), 1:684–711.

<sup>8</sup> Numerous works on theological retrieval have emerged. The literature is extensive, featuring both academic and popular-level material. For the purposes of this essay, theological retrieval entails the sentiment captured by Darren Sarisky who writes that retrieval theologians are “focused simply on attending to, indwelling, and commending what they take to be the most compelling articulations of the Christian gospel.” Often, such retrieval projects find especially compelling articulations of the gospel in early church literature. This fact is true

ture, he employed a *regula fidei*, a rule of faith, drawn from the Apostles' Creed and interpretive judgments refined during the fourth-century Trinitarian debates. This rich use of tradition allows Gill to serve as a model for contemporary Baptists who engage in theological retrieval work.

After briefly contextualizing Gill's remarks about church tradition, I consider Gill's use of tradition in scriptural interpretation, surveying his prescriptive statements in favor of a *regula fidei* and analyzing his use of a *regula fidei* in his construction of Trinitarian theology. I conclude with brief reflections on Gill's value for contemporary retrieval projects.

### Contextualizing Gill's Remarks About Christian Tradition

Gill might not at first seem like an exemplar of Baptist engagement with church tradition because, at least upon an initial read, some of his rhetoric appears to reject tradition's value. In a 1750 sermon entitled “The Scriptures the Only Guide in Matters of Religion,” Gill warned his audience that “in religious matters, the way-marks or way-posts to guide and direct men in the way, are the scriptures, the oracles of God, and they only.” He contended that such a firm commitment to scriptural authority necessitates rejecting “education traditions” and “the traditions of men.” These false traditions, Gill reasoned, are Pharisaical in nature and do not accord with the freeness of the gospel. Citing Paul's admonition to avoid “philosophy and vain deceit,” he exhorted his listeners not to labor “under the notion and pretense of an apostolic tradition” because “unwritten traditions are not the rule.” Only “the word of God is the rule of our faith and practice.”<sup>9</sup>

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for many Protestant thinkers who might not have received wide exposure to early church literature during their formative years. See Darren Sarisky, “Introduction,” in *Theologies of Retrieval: An Exploration and Appraisal* (London: T&T Clark, 2017), 2. For introductions to retrieval in a distinctly Baptist key, consider Steven Harmon, *Towards Baptist Catholicity: Essays on Tradition and the Baptist Vision* (Milton Keynes: Paternoster, 2016); Matthew Emerson, Christopher Morgan, and R. Lucas Stamps, eds., *Baptists and the Christian Tradition: Towards an Evangelical Baptist Catholicity* (Nashville: B&H Academic, 2020); Cameron H. Jorgenson, “Bapto-Catholicism: Recovering Tradition and Reconsidering the Baptist Identity” (Ph.D. diss., Baylor University, 2008); Stephen R. Holmes, *Tradition and Renewal in Baptist Life* (Oxford: Whitley, 2003).

<sup>9</sup> Gill preached “The Scriptures the Only Guide to Matters of Religion” in Barbican on November 2, 1750. For the text of the sermon cited here, see John Gill, *A Collection of Sermons and Tracts* (London: George Keith, 1773): 2:480–81.

Similar warnings appear in other works by Gill, including his systematic theology, *A Complete Body of Doctrinal and Practical Divinity*. *Body of Divinity* opens with a brief history of Christian theology's development and, with very stark language, presents a narrative of decline. In this narrative, Satan began to corrupt the church soon after the time of the apostles. Many patristic theologians "were originally pagans," and so while they were perhaps skilled in "demolishing paganism," there was a "want of clearness, accuracy, and consistence in their doctrine." Medieval theologians such as Bonaventure and Aquinas too often engaged in philosophical speculation, and "their whole scheme was chiefly directed to support Antichristianism."<sup>10</sup> Though the time of the Protestant Reformation brought a brief respite from these Satanic corruptions, doctrinal confusion continued in the church. For this reason, Gill deemed the writing of his systematic theology necessary. He claimed that he composed his work out of a simple desire to "search the scriptures," for the Scriptures—not tradition—serve as "the only rule of faith and practice."<sup>11</sup>

Though Gill's statements about tradition could be unsparing, his actual practice as a biblical exegete and theologian evidences a different, more nuanced approach. Throughout his published works, he cited with a remarkable level of frequency the "traditions of men" that he warned about in his 1750 sermon. In polemical tracts such as *The Cause of God and Truth*, he appealed to Irenaeus, Origen, Augustine, and Aquinas, not as foils with whom he disagreed, but as sources of doctrinal and spiritual authority.<sup>12</sup> Throughout his biblical commentaries, he associated his interpretation of biblical texts with readings provided by patristic sources.<sup>13</sup> Perhaps most interesting, in some of the same passages in

<sup>10</sup> John Gill, *A Complete Body of Doctrinal and Practical Divinity*, rev ed. (London: Tegg & Company, 1839), 1:xxvii.

<sup>11</sup> Gill, *A Complete Body of Doctrinal and Practical Divinity*, xxx.

<sup>12</sup> E.g., Gill featured numerous quotations from earlier theologians throughout *The Cause of God and Truth*. For an incomplete list of such quotations, see John Gill, *The Cause of God and Truth*, rev. ed. (London: Thomas Tegg and Son, 1838), 580. At times, Gill drew these quotations from Reformed guides to patristic literature such as André Rivet's *Critici Sacri Specimen* (see, e.g., *The Cause of God and Truth*, 425, 441, 453–54, 463, 473, 480). However, Gill's use of these guides did not prevent him from engaging with the primary source material directly (see *The Cause of God and Truth*, 581–600).

<sup>13</sup> For example, Gill's commentary on Song of Songs explicitly used interpretive traditions drawn from Origen and Gregory of Nyssa. See John Gill, *An Exposition of the Book of Solomon's Song* (London: William Hill Collingridge, 1854),

which he passionately contended for the authority of the Scripture alone, he explicitly stated that Scripture should not be read alone and should receive interpretation according to the *regula fidei*, the rule of faith.<sup>14</sup>

Understanding Gill's polemical context resolves his seemingly contradictory opinions about church tradition. Like many Baptists in his era, Gill often debated the practice of believers' baptism and the validity of Roman Catholicism. In such debates, he called his audience away from what he perceived as theological errors and directed them to the teachings he believed accorded with the Bible. In the 1750 sermon in which he bemoaned the "traditions of men," he devoted most of his attention to defending credobaptism against its paedobaptist critics.<sup>15</sup> The attacks on tradition that he offered in that sermon sought to counter paedobaptist arguments that, in his estimate, relied too heavily on appeals to church tradition and insufficiently attended to the biblical text. The passages in Gill's systematic theology that expressed discontent with such figures as Origen and Aquinas primarily sought to present his volume as a trustworthy, Bible-based text in a time of religious confusion. Such language was a rhetorical strategy intended to give Gill's audience confidence in his work.<sup>16</sup> Even Gill's association of Thomas Aquinas with the spirit of the antichrist—admittedly bracing language for modern audiences—can receive at least some contextual explanation. Gill had Aquinas's contributions to Roman Catholic theology in view, and associating Roman Catholicism with the antichrist was common among Baptists

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55–56, 201. Gill's New Testament commentary features frequent appeals to and citations from such figures as Athanasius and Augustine. See, e.g., John Gill, *An Exposition of the New Testament* (London: Mathews and Leigh, 1809), 1:796, 2:6, 3:162, 3:469, 3:653, 3:749.

<sup>14</sup> See Gill, *Body of Divinity*, 1:x–xiii.

<sup>15</sup> Although this sermon is ostensibly a meditation on tradition's role in theological construction, it actually serves as a polemic against pedobaptism. Likely for this reason, the sermon does not appear alongside Gill's other sermons in his published corpus—such as his annual sermons, occasional sermons, or funeral sermons. Rather, it appears under the heading "polemical tracts" (see Gill, *Sermons and Tracts*, 2:479–96).

<sup>16</sup> The introduction to Gill's systematic theology features lengthy warnings about the theological errors Gill perceived as being rampant during the time of its release. It seeks to assure its readers that Gill's work will provide a trustworthy guide. See the rhetorical strategy employed in Gill, *Body of Divinity*, 1:ii—xxx.

both before and after Gill's time.<sup>17</sup>

Given this contextual data, careful readers can discern internal consistency within Gill's thought. When Gill responded to what he perceived as theological corruption within the church's tradition, he issued clarion calls to accept the Bible as the only authoritative source for faith and practice. However, when he engaged in biblical commentary or theological writing, he carefully mined the tradition to enrich his work. Gill was not against church tradition—or even the use of church tradition in theological construction. He was against theological claims that he deemed unbiblical and was willing to attack those claims if arguments made for them appealed to tradition.<sup>18</sup>

What distinguished Gill from many of his Baptist contemporaries was his extensive reading—and his willingness to use the knowledge gained from his reading in meaningful ways. An impressive autodidact, Gill was fluent in multiple languages and had first-hand knowledge of patristic texts and texts written by near contemporaries who were not Baptist.<sup>19</sup> At times, he could cite patristic theologians such as Irenaeus, Cyril of Jerusalem, and Augustine. At other times, he could cite

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<sup>17</sup> E.g., the Second London Confession of Faith describes the Roman Catholic Pope as “that antichrist, that man of sin, and son of perdition, that exalteth himself in the Church against Christ.” See W. J. McGlothlin, *Baptist Confessions of Faith* (Philadelphia: American Baptist Publication Society, 1911), 265. For a survey of Gill's rhetoric against Roman Catholicism, consider Tom J. Nettles, “Egregious Folly: John Gill's Picture of Roman Catholicism in Proverbs,” *SBJT* 25.1 (2021): 29–42. Baptist relations with Roman Catholics have thankfully improved since Gill's time, as evidenced by the 2010 formal conversations between the Baptist World Alliance and the Roman Catholic Church. A helpful summary of those proceedings appears in David Chapman, “Roman Catholics and Baptists in Dialogue: Convergence and Divergence Assessed,” *Ecclesiology* 11 (2015): 84–92.

<sup>18</sup> Gill's willingness to employ church tradition as a ministerial authority under Scripture's final authority generally accords with the approach taken by other Protestant and Baptist theologians. Consider the brief survey of Protestant interaction with tradition found in Richard J. Bauckham, “Tradition in Relation to Scripture and Reason,” in *Scripture, Tradition, and Reason: A Study in the Criteria of Christian Doctrine—Essays in Honour of Richard P. C. Hanson*, ed. Richard Bauckham and Benjamin Drewery (Edinburgh: T&T Clark, 1988), 117–45.

<sup>19</sup> For a survey of Gill's educational development and language fluency, see the biographical survey provided in Robert W. Oliver, “John Gill (1697–1771): His Life and Ministry,” in *The Life and Thought of John Gill (1697–1771): A Tercentennial Appreciation*, ed. Michael A. G. Haykin (Leiden: Brill, 1997), 7–50.

Protestant scholastic theologians such as Johannes Piscator, Johannes Cocceius, and Hermann Witsius. This approach imbued his writings with a depth not always found in Baptist works. Gill used this depth to interact substantively with the church's tradition.

### Gill's Call for a *Regula Fidei* in Scriptural Interpretation

Gill was a prolific commentary writer, and though he commented on biblical books that represented a range of historical contexts and literary genres, he employed a consistent methodology. He explicitly stated this methodology in the introductions to his commentaries and in portions of his theological tracts. Though these remarks were often brief, examining them as they appear throughout his corpus allows a complete picture to emerge.

For Gill, biblical interpretation begins with careful attention to the Scripture, the “infallible rule of faith and practice.”<sup>20</sup> Interpreters must first consult the “original text”—that is, the biblical text in its original languages—as well as the “versions of several learned men.”<sup>21</sup> Throughout this process, they must rely on the Holy Spirit, who “dictated the sacred scriptures” and can “serve as the best interpreter of them.”<sup>22</sup> The historical context of a given passage must also receive attention; for example, Gill informed his readers that “knowledge of the affairs of the Jews ... such as they were in and about the times of Christ and his apostles ... is not the most inconsiderable.”<sup>23</sup>

However, Gill devoted most of his attention to clarifying how church tradition should shape biblical interpretation. While Scripture is the infallible source of truth, one must read Scripture according to the rule of faith or analogy of faith.<sup>24</sup> For Gill, the rule of faith serves as a summary of gospel truths received from the tradition. It is not the Scripture but is a time-tested statement that presents Scripture's key teachings. Such a rule is “a set of principles upon the plan of the Scriptures, deduced from them, and agreeably [sic] to them ... from which the

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<sup>20</sup> John Gill, *An Exposition of the Old Testament* (London: Mathews and Leigh, 1810), 1:xxii.

<sup>21</sup> Gill, *Solomon's Song*, iii.

<sup>22</sup> John Gill, *An Exposition of the New Testament* (London: Mathews and Leigh, 1809), 1:iv.

<sup>23</sup> Gill, *Exposition of New Testament*, 1:v.

<sup>24</sup> Gill used the terms analogy of faith and rule of faith synonymously.

prophesier or preacher should never swerve.”<sup>25</sup>

Referring to a rule of faith was not a new practice in Christian theology. Several ante-Nicene theologians employed the concept to significant effect. Irenaeus frequently mentioned a *κανὼν τῆς ἀληθείας*, a rule of truth, in his *Adversus Haereses*; Origen provided a rule in his preface to *De Principiis*; and Tertullian offered several expositions of a rule of faith in *De Virginibus Velandis* and *De Praescriptione Haereticorum*.<sup>26</sup> Such appeals to an accepted interpretive rule sought to, in the words of Paul Blowers, offer a “narrative construction” that “set forth the basic ‘dramatic’ structure of the Christian vision of the world.” This narrative construction followed the biblical account of creation, incarnation, redemption, and consummation. It provided a “hermeneutical frame of reference for the interpretation of Christian Scripture and Christian experience.”<sup>27</sup>

Gill knew these historical developments well. He quoted several ante-Nicene definitions of the rule of faith and noted that, though the rule’s precise wording (*verba*) might vary depending on the author in question, its central doctrinal claims—its substance (*res*)—remained stable. This theological consistency demonstrated that there was indeed a shared “*regula fidei*, a rule of faith” that was “professed very early in the Christian church.”<sup>28</sup>

This doctrinal consistency led Gill to commend to his readers the Apostles’ Creed as a serviceable rule of faith, though that text did not

<sup>25</sup> Gill, *Exposition of New Testament*, 2:546.

<sup>26</sup> I focus primarily on ante-Nicene figures here because they featured most prominently in Gill’s justifications for a rule of faith. For surveys of early Christian expressions of the rule of faith, see Joseph Lienhard, “Canons and Rules of Faith,” in *The Oxford Handbook of Early Christian Biblical Interpretation*, ed. Paul Blowers and Peter Martens (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2019), 55–70; Everett Ferguson, *The Rule of Faith: A Guide* (Eugene: Cascade, 2015), 1–15.

<sup>27</sup> Paul M. Blowers, “The *Regula Fidei* and the Narrative Character of Early Christian Faith,” *ProEcl* 6.2 (1997): 202. Also consider Paul Hartog, “The ‘Rule of Faith’ and Patristic Biblical Exegesis,” *TJ* 28 (2007): 65–86; Prosper S. Grech, “The *Regula Fidei* as a Hermeneutical Principle in Patristic Exegesis,” in *The Interpretation of the Bible: The International Symposium in Slovenia*, ed. Jože Krašovec (Sheffield: Sheffield Academic Press, 1998), 589–601.

<sup>28</sup> Gill, *Body of Divinity*, 1:xi–xii. Ferguson, a modern writer, appears to have reached the same conclusion that Gill drew. He has recently written, “There was not a fixed name in the second and third centuries for what is now called the rule of faith, nor was there a fixed wording for what it included. There was nonetheless a definite content, however varied the formulation of that content might be” (*Rule of Faith*, 32).

feature in the writings of Irenaeus, Origen, and Tertullian. In Gill’s estimate, the Creed had value because it adequately summarized the various ante-Nicene definitions of the rule. It also succinctly narrated God’s saving works in the economy, recounting God’s work in creation, redemption, and the coming eschaton. In *Body of Divinity*, he wrote, “This is the rule of all prophesying (or preaching); therefore, according to the rule of sacred Scripture and the Apostles’ Creed, all interpretations, disputations, questions, and opinions in the church, are to be examined, that they may be conformable thereunto.”<sup>29</sup>

Gill did not envision the Creed serving as a church confessional document or baptismal symbol per se; rather, he found its contents useful for retrieving the ante-Nicene practice of a ruled reading of Scripture. With his call to have a “set of principles upon the plan of the Scriptures, deduced from them . . . from which the prophesier or preacher should never swerve,” he envisioned a return to the approach he found in such writers as Irenaeus and Tertullian.<sup>30</sup>

Following the lead of these early theologians, Gill concluded that one should read Scripture in accordance with an accepted interpretive tradition, a tradition whose material content is drawn from the church’s kerygma, systematized, and then passed down through the church’s tradition. Because the Apostles’ Creed conveys this tradition in succinct form, it can serve as a reliable interpretive guide. The Creed provides a metanarrative that recounts God’s works in the divine economy, and Bible readers should assume its content antecedent to their reading of a particular biblical passage.

Gill possessed a high view of the rule of faith’s value, and he claimed that it could aid in many matters related to church life, from determining proper theology to mitigating church disputes. His esteem of the rule of faith was so high that he made the rhetorically-significant decision to refer to two rules—the rule of Scripture, which is the final “rule of faith and practice,” and then the interpretive rule that governs Scripture’s reading, the “analogy of faith” or “rule of faith.” Throughout his writings, he deliberately placed these two rules together and appealed to both as he offered interpretive decisions and theological arguments.<sup>31</sup>

<sup>29</sup> Gill, *Body of Divinity*, 1:xi–xii. With this statement, Gill offered a paraphrase of the German Reformed theologian David Pareus, though he offered no extensive citation.

<sup>30</sup> Gill, *Body of Divinity*, 2:546.

<sup>31</sup> E.g., notice how Gill carefully used the term “final rule of faith” to refer

For example, Gill advised ministers to avoid theological error by reading Scripture alongside the rule of faith, for though Scripture is sufficient, it requires correct interpretation. The rule of faith provides a reliable interpretive frame by which one might read Scripture. Contending that all Christian teaching should accord with both “the Scriptures of truth, and the analogy of faith,” Gill warned that false teachers fail to understand the divine perfections or the nature of Christ because they attend only to the Scripture and not the tradition-approved rule that can govern Scripture’s interpretation.<sup>32</sup> He further instructed Christian leaders to avoid sharing their opinions and to instead preach “the oracles of God” according to “the proportion and analogy of faith.” Doing so would allow ministers to discern the “mind of Christ” found in the Scriptures.<sup>33</sup>

Gill also highlighted how employing the two rules, the rule of Scripture and the rule of faith, might address questions that arise in ministry. Noting the dispute over 2 Peter’s canonicity, he advised his readers to accept the epistle, not only because several leaders in the early church did, but because he found its theological content agreeable to both “the analogy of faith” and “the rest of the Sacred writings.”<sup>34</sup> In addition, although congregations may debate the propriety of certain hymns, Scripture and the rule of faith can provide the theological material by which one might assess a given hymn’s merits.<sup>35</sup>

### Gill’s Trinitarian Theology: Exemplifying a Ruled Reading of Scripture

Gill commended a ruled reading of Scripture throughout his writings, and as he developed his Trinitarian theology, he exemplified how such a ruled reading might occur in practice.<sup>36</sup> Gill lived in an era

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to Scripture and the terms “analogy of faith” or “rule of faith” to refer to tradition. This trend appears throughout his biblical commentaries and systematic theology.

<sup>32</sup> Gill, *Exposition of New Testament*, 3:355, 486.

<sup>33</sup> Gill, *Exposition of Old Testament*, 5:223.

<sup>34</sup> Gill, *Exposition of New Testament*, 3:583.

<sup>35</sup> Gill, *Sermons and Tracts*, 3:590. Gill pastored the church once led by Benjamin Keach, the minister who helped to introduce hymn singing to Baptists. For a survey of Keach’s life and an analysis of Keach’s engagement with church tradition, see D. B. Riker, *A Catholic Reformed Theologian: Federalism and Baptism in the Thought of Benjamin Keach, 1640–1704* (Milton Keynes: Paternoster, 2009).

<sup>36</sup> I choose to analyze Gill’s Trinitarian theology to demonstrate his use of a

marked by controversy over the Trinity.<sup>37</sup> He responded to objections against Trinitarianism in his systematic theology and polemical tracts such as *The Doctrine of the Trinity Stated and Vindicated* and *A Dissertation Concerning the Eternal Sonship of Christ*.<sup>38</sup> With these writings, Gill sought to recover the exegetical judgments of earlier interpreters—particularly interpreters who wrote during the fourth-century Trinitarian debates.<sup>39</sup> He set these judgments out as interpretive rules; in his estimate, they represented *how* one should read Scripture. This fact reveals that although Gill upheld the Apostles’ Creed as his stated *regula fidei*, and though he often cited ante-Nicene writers to justify and defend his use of a rule of faith, in practice, he drew from the broader Christian tradition, particularly the rich period of the fourth century.

Gill’s focus on the fourth century was intentional. As the Baptist theologian Stephen Holmes has explained, the “only possible definition” of Trinitarianism is “historical” because the term refers to a set of doc-

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ruled reading of Scripture because of the deep engagement with Scripture and tradition that Gill’s Trinitarian theology evidences.

<sup>37</sup> The Salters’ Hall debates serve as but one noteworthy example of Trinitarian debates during Gill’s lifetime. Timothy George observes that the Salters’ Hall controversy occurred the same year that Gill became pastor at Horsleydown (see George, *John Gill*, 22). For a survey of the Salters’ Hall controversy, consider Stephen Copson, ed., *Trinity, Creed and Confusion: The Salters’ Hall Debate of 1719* (Oxford: Centre for Baptist Studies, 2020).

<sup>38</sup> Gill composed *Doctrine of Trinity Stated* in 1731; the work received publication as John Gill, *The Doctrine of the Trinity, Stated and Vindicated* (London: Aaron Ward, 1731). Gill’s *A Dissertation Concerning The Eternal Sonship of Christ* was one of the last works he composed; it received publication in 1768. For the details concerning the publication of *Eternal Sonship*, see Roberts, *John Gill*, 30–32.

<sup>39</sup> With the phrase “exegetical judgments,” I have in mind reading strategies that emerge from the biblical text—i.e., the text seems implicitly to direct readers to read it in a certain manner—that are then drawn out and developed by exegetes and commentators in the church’s tradition. These judgments originate from both the text and the tradition, and they provide a *regula fidei* that directs interpretation. Consider, e.g., Augustine’s remark that “scattered throughout the Scriptures” and “marked out by learned” expositors there exists “a kind of canonical rule” (Augustine, *The Trinity*, 2nd ed., trans. Edmund Hill, ed. John Rotelle [Hyde Park: New City Press, 2015], 98). I assert that Gill modeled just such an approach as he developed his Trinitarian theology, though I concede the phrase exegetical judgments is of a more modern provenance. The phrase appears significantly, e.g., in R. B. Jamieson and Tyler Wittman, *Biblical Reasoning: Christological and Trinitarian Rules for Exegesis* (Baker: Grand Rapids, 2022).

trinal commitments refined during the fourth-century theological debates.<sup>40</sup> The conceptual categories that undergird the church's definition of Trinitarianism came to the fore especially between Nicaea in 325 and Constantinople in 381 and received late refinement by Augustine in the fifth century. The material from this era informs and illuminates the affirmations and anathemas presented in the Nicene Creed. By resourcing this material, Gill sought to ensure his reading of Scripture stood in accordance with the broader Nicene tradition.

Gill's exegesis of Prov 8:22 illustrates how strongly he sought to appropriate fourth-century interpretive practices. Proverbs 8:22 was, in many ways, the *locus classicus* during fourth-century Trinitarian debates. Interpreters of the era read Prov 8:22, which in the LXX states, "The Lord made me [created me at] the beginning of his ways for his works," as figurally pointing to the Son.<sup>41</sup> Athanasius, for example, considered Prov 8:22 extensively in his *Orations Against the Arians*, contending against his opponents that the passage does not present the Son as a creation of God. Rather, through the process of partitive exegesis, Athanasius believed one could discern the text's true, albeit hidden, meaning. The phrase "the Lord made me" could only reference the Son's incarnate state. This reading operates proleptically; it anticipates the Son's work in the economy.<sup>42</sup>

<sup>40</sup> Stephen R. Holmes, "Classical Trinitarianism and Eternal Functional Subordination: Some Historical and Dogmatic Reflections," *Scottish Bulletin of Evangelical Theology* 35.1 (2017): 92. Holmes defines classical Trinitarianism in the following way: "this core Christian doctrine is determined by the debate that, roughly put, occurs between Nicaea and Constantinople" while noting that "I want to add Augustine's interpretation of the Nicene heritage also" ("Classical Trinitarianism and Eternal Functional Subordination," 93–94). With this framing, Holmes follows Michel René Barnes, "The Fourth Century as Trinitarian Canon," in *Christian Origins: Theology, Rhetoric, and Community*, ed. Lewis Ayres and Gareth Jones (London: Routledge, 1998), 47–67. See also the rich survey of fourth-century Trinitarian thought found in Lewis Ayers, *Nicaea and Its Legacy: An Approach to Fourth-Century Trinitarian Theology* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2004).

<sup>41</sup> The LXX reads, "κύριος ἔκτισέν με ἀρχὴν ὁδῶν αὐτοῦ εἰς ἔργα αὐτοῦ." See Rick Brannan et al., eds., *The Lexham English Septuagint* (Bellingham: Lexham Press, 2012), Prov. 8:22.

<sup>42</sup> Athanasius offered this exegesis of Prov 8:22 in *Orations Against the Arians*. For an accessible translation of the relevant portions of this text along with a helpful commentary, consider Khaled Anatolios, *Athanasius* (London: Routledge, 2004), 110–75.

Gill was aware of this fourth-century tradition and allowed it to shape his interpretation of Prov 8:22.<sup>43</sup> Like Athanasius and many other pre-critical interpreters, Gill read Proverbs 8 Christologically.<sup>44</sup> He arrived at this conclusion through an intertextual reading of the term wisdom. Gill connected the *logos* of John's Gospel with the wisdom mentioned in Proverbs 8. In this interpretation, the *logos* of God in John 1 and the wisdom of God in Proverbs 8 have the same referent—Christ.<sup>45</sup> Gill then explained that if the Son, the "the wisdom of God" mentioned in Proverbs 8, "was created by God, then God must be without his *logos*, word, and wisdom, until he [wisdom] was created," which would, in Gill's estimate, be absurd.<sup>46</sup> This reasoning deliberately echoed the judgments reached in the fourth century. As Gill well knew, Athanasius challenged his opponents by stating, "According to you, God does not possess that in which and through which [i.e., wisdom] he makes all things."<sup>47</sup> In the end, Gill determined that through partitive exegesis, Prov 8:22 could uphold eternal generation and an allusion to the Son's mediatorial work in the economy—the same conclusion that Athanasius

<sup>43</sup> Gill documented the fourth-century interpretive history of this passage most notably in the tracts *Doctrine of Trinity Stated* and *Dissertation Concerning Eternal Sonship*. For a survey of Gill's treatment of Prov 8:22 throughout his corpus, see Jonathan Elliot Swan, "The Fountain of Life: John Gill's Doctrine of Christ's Eternal Sonship" (PhD diss., The Southern Baptist Theological Seminary, 2021), 149–53.

<sup>44</sup> Interpreting wisdom as an identifier for Christ was a common exegetical strategy, in part because of the reference to *logos* in John's prologue and Paul's description of Christ as the power and wisdom of God in 1 Cor 1:24. For brief introductions to this exegetical judgment, consider J. Warren Smith, "The Trinity in the Fourth-Century Fathers," in *The Oxford Handbook of the Trinity*, ed. Gilles Emery and Matthew Levering (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2011), 117; Frances Young, *Biblical Exegesis and the Formation of Christian Culture* (Grand Rapids: Baker, 1997), 33–38; Matthew Emerson, "The Role of Proverbs 8: Eternal Generation and Hermeneutics Ancient and Modern," in *Retrieving Eternal Generation*, ed. Fred Sanders and Scott Swain (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 2017), 44–66. Gill knew this interpretive tradition and referenced many early interpreters who espoused it (see Gill, *Sermons and Tracts*, 2:541–43, 546–47).

<sup>45</sup> Consider this example, drawn from Gill's Old Testament commentary: Gill, *Exposition of Old Testament*, 4:333. See also Gill, *Sermons and Tracts*, 3:86.

<sup>46</sup> Gill, *Body of Divinity*, 1:222.

<sup>47</sup> See Anatolios, *Athanasius*, 111. Gill paraphrased this argument made by Athanasius—and credited Athanasius as its originator—in Gill, *Sermons and Tracts*, 2:547.

and other early interpreters drew.<sup>48</sup> In this way, Gill allowed fourth-century judgments about figural readings and partitive exegesis to direct his interpretation of Scripture.

This desire to interpret Scripture in accordance with fourth-century theologians grants theological authority to the church's tradition, a fact that Gill openly championed. In the tract *A Dissertation Concerning the Eternal Sonship of Christ*, he explained that his aim was "not to give the proof of this doctrine from the sacred Scriptures" but rather to provide a historical argument.<sup>49</sup> He surveyed Trinitarian thought through the church's first eight centuries, starting with apostolic fathers such as Ignatius of Antioch and concluding with brief references to Boethius. However, he devoted most of his attention to highlighting the important concepts clarified and defined during the fourth century. From this survey, Gill concluded that the church's tradition has authority for Bible interpreters. It offers theologians a sophisticated set of exegetical and theological judgments. This material *is* what the church confesses to be Trinitarianism; to deny it is equivalent to denying Christianity.<sup>50</sup>

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<sup>48</sup> See Gill, *Body of Divinity*, 1:225. There, commenting on Prov 8:22, Gill wrote, "For wisdom, or Christ, proceeds in this account of himself, in a very regular and orderly manner; he first gives an account of his eternal existence, as the Son of God, by divine generation; and then of constitution, as Mediator, in his office-capacity."

<sup>49</sup> Gill wrote, "My design in what I am about is, not to give the proof of this doctrine from the sacred scriptures, but to shew who first set themselves against it, and who have continued the opposition to it, more or less, to this time; and, on the other hand, to shew that found and orthodox Christians, from the earliest times of Christianity to the present, have asserted and defended it" (*Sermons and Tracts*, 2:534).

<sup>50</sup> With some hyperbole, Gill offered, "The church of God has been in the possession of this doctrine of the eternal generation and Sonship of Christ, from the beginning of Christianity to the present age, almost *eighteen hundred years*; nor has there been any one man who professed to hold the doctrine of the Trinity, or of the three distinct divine persons in the unity of the divine essence, that ever opposed it" (*Sermons and Tracts*, 2:562). Gill's pastoral practice reveals how seriously he took this point. In 1768, he led his church at Carter Lane to excommunicate a member for denying eternal generation. He then directed the church to accept a revised confession of faith that upheld the Nicene formulation of the Son as begotten, not made, and consubstantial with the Father. For details about the excommunication, see Seymour J. Price, "Side-lights From an Old Minute Book," *Baptist Quarterly* 5.2 (1930): 93; R. Philip Roberts, *Continuity and Change: London Calvinistic Baptists and The Evangelical Reviv-*

### Gill, the Rule of Faith, and Contemporary Theological Retrieval

Gill's extensive use of a rule of faith is one that contemporary Baptists—and contemporary evangelicals more broadly—have not always embraced. Evangelical literature often uses the phrases "rule of faith" or "analogy of faith" to denote the Protestant principle that Scripture should interpret Scripture.<sup>51</sup> Typical evangelical uses of a rule of faith do not, as Gill did, seek to recall an interpretive standard such as the Apostles' Creed or significant fourth-century theologians and then use that standard as a framework by which to interpret Scripture. This reluctance to engage with tradition perhaps emerges from a fear of minimizing Scripture's sufficiency and authority.

For his part, Gill expressed no such concerns and argued that both Scripture and the Protestant tradition commend the sort of ruled reading he envisioned. He claimed that the French Reformer John Calvin and two German Reformed ministers, David Pareus and Johannes Piscator, believed that Paul's command in Rom 12:6 to "prophesy according to the proportion of faith" referenced the need to interpret Scripture according to "the first axioms of religion."<sup>52</sup> In his reading of the Romans text, the word faith serves as a referent for the central tenets of Christianity; therefore, to prophesy or teach according to faith is to interpret Scripture in accordance with accepted doctrinal statements.

This understanding of Rom 12:6 was once common among Protestants, and though contemporary Bible commentators have largely rejected it, Gill used it to argue for the rule of faith's biblical warrant.<sup>53</sup> He contended that the rule does not violate Scripture's primacy. Rather,

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*al*, 1760–1820 (Wheaton: Richard Owens Publishers, 1989), 176–84. For a reproduction of the new confession of faith, see R. E. Seymour, "John Gill: Baptist Theologian, 1697–1771" (PhD diss., The University of Edinburgh, 1954), 90.

<sup>51</sup> E.g., consider the helpful survey of contemporary evangelical presentations of the rule of faith found in Todd Hains, *Martin Luther and the Rule of Faith: Reading God's Word for God's People* (Downers Grove: InterVarsity Academic, 2022), 13–14.

<sup>52</sup> Gill, *Body of Divinity*, 1:xi–xii. See also Gill's comments on Rom 12:6 in his New Testament commentary, which accord with the statements made in *Body of Divinity* (*Exposition of New Testament*, 2:545–46).

<sup>53</sup> For a list of significant pre-critical and contemporary commentaries that address this issue in relation to Rom 12:6, see Hains, *Luther and the Rule of Faith*, 12–20.

its content is “perfectly agreeable” to Scripture because it is “deduced” from Scripture’s teaching.<sup>54</sup> Scripture, then, supplies the material content for the rule of faith and condones the process of objectifying Christian truth in summary form.

This objectification of Christian truth, passed down by church tradition, serves as a pre-understanding that can direct Bible interpreters to read Scripture in light of God’s economic work. The reception of the rule of faith through the medium of tradition allows a shared reading culture to emerge. In Gill’s phrasing, employing the rule of faith permits Bible interpreters to show their “agreement” with other Christians in the “principal parts” of the gospel.<sup>55</sup>

Both Scripture and tradition play a role in scriptural interpretation, though Scripture retains its singular authority. Scripture features conceptual categories that exegetes in the tradition explicate and form into exegetical judgments. These judgments serve as guides for Bible readers across the church universal. In this way, Scripture serves as the source of the tradition’s content, and the tradition aids in reading Scripture well.

As a Baptist theologian, then, Gill upheld a commitment to Scripture’s authority and employed the rich resources of church tradition in his reading of Scripture. In this way, he serves as a model for contemporary Baptists who wish to retrieve a ruled reading of Scripture.<sup>56</sup> His work demonstrates that such an approach is not discordant with the Baptist tradition. Furthermore, as conversations about theological retrieval and an attending ruled reading of Scripture continue to rise in evangelical circles, Gill can serve as a Baptist representative in those discussions.<sup>57</sup>

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<sup>54</sup> The full quotation reads thus: “Upon the whole, it seems no ways incongruous with the sacred writings but perfectly agreeable to them, that articles and heads of faith, or a summary of gospel truths, may be collected from them” (see Gill, *Body of Divinity*, 1:xii). Consider also Gill’s remarks in *Exposition of New Testament*, 2:546.

<sup>55</sup> Gill, *Body of Divinity*, 1:xii.

<sup>56</sup> E.g., Harmon, *Towards Baptist Catholicity*, 3–6.

<sup>57</sup> Contemporary literature on a ruled reading of Scripture is becoming expansive, but at the popular level, consider the helpful J. Todd Billings, *The Word of God for the People of God: An Entryway to the Theological Interpretation of Scripture* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 2010). Consider also Robert Jenson, *Canon and Creed*, Interpretation Series (Louisville: Westminster John Knox Press, 2010); Joseph Gordon, *Divine Scripture in Human Understanding: A Systematic Theology of the Christian Bible* (Notre Dame: University of Notre Dame Press, 2019).

## Conclusion

Gill advocated for a ruled reading of Christian Scripture that employed the resources of the church’s tradition, most notably the Apostles’ Creed and material developed during the fourth-century Trinitarian debates. His use of a ruled reading of Scripture did not demote Scripture from its authoritative position; instead, it allowed for a rich reading of Scripture that engendered continuity with the broader church catholic. Gill’s work in this area can serve as an exemplar for contemporary Baptists interested in theological retrieval.