

John Gill on the One, Holy, Catholic, and Apostolic Church: Retrieving a Baptist Nicene Ecclesiology

Matt Pitts

Jacksonville College, Jacksonville, TX

Abstract: *The task of this essay is to focus on John Gill (1697–1771) to determine whether his ecclesiology is catholic (i.e., universal). The measure of a catholic ecclesiology will be the four marks of the church found in the Nicene Creed (one, holy, catholic, and apostolic). This essay will examine Gill’s writings, specifically his Complete Body of Divinity and selections from his Exposition of the New Testament and his Exposition of the Book of Solomon’s Song. I will then argue that Gill’s ecclesiology is in harmony with the Nicene Creed and emphasizes the unity and catholicity of the church. Though his comments on the holiness and apostolicity of the church are less frequent, he does affirm these marks of the church as well. This focus on the four marks from the Nicene Creed distinguishes this essay from previous articles on Gill’s catholicity.*

Key Words: *apostolic, catholic, ecclesiology, holy, marks of the church, Nicene Creed, one, unity*

The case for Baptist catholicity may appear oxymoronic to some, but increasingly Baptist theologians are making the case that on all major Christian doctrines Baptists are planted firmly within the bounds of the small “c” catholic faith. Nowhere are Baptists more distinctive from other Christian traditions, though, than in their ecclesiology. Therefore, in making the case for Baptist catholicity, ecclesiology must be addressed. If Baptists prove themselves to be catholic in their theology proper, Christology, and so forth but are found to be decidedly un-catholic in their ecclesiology, then Baptist catholicity will only ever be a partial affair applying to certain doctrines. If instead Baptists are demonstrably catholic even in their approach to ecclesiology, then this will go a long way toward demonstrating the catholicity of Baptist theology without removing or denying Baptist distinctives.¹

¹ Christopher Green makes the same point with admirable concision when he says, “Baptist ecclesiology must be catholic if Baptist theology as such is to be catholic in any meaningful sense” (“Baptist Catholicity in the Ecclesiology of John Gill [1697–1771],” *Themelios* 49.3 [2024: 654].

To demonstrate Baptist catholicity in ecclesiology across Baptist history and theology would require a lengthy volume examining the theology and practice of various theologians and churches. The goal of this essay, however, is much more modest: to determine whether and to what extent the ecclesiology of John Gill (1697–1771) is catholic.² For the purposes of this essay, the measure of catholicity in ecclesiology will be the four marks of the church found in the Nicene Creed: one, holy, catholic, and apostolic. Therefore, this essay will examine the writings of John Gill, specifically his *Complete Body of Doctrinal and Practical Divinity* as well as selections from his *Exposition of the New Testament* and his *Exposition of the Book of Solomon’s Song* with particular relevance to these four marks. I will then argue that Gill shows no signs of dismissing any of the four marks of the church found in the Nicene Creed, neither does he dismiss any of the four marks as incompatible with a Baptist ecclesiology. On the contrary, in agreement with the Nicene Creed, Gill puts great emphasis upon the unity and catholicity of the church and though his comments on the holiness and apostolicity of the church are considerably less frequent, he does affirm these marks of the church as well.

The focus on the four marks of the church found in the Nicene Creed distinguishes this essay from previous articles on Gill’s catholicity by David Rathel and Christopher Green. Rathel argues that “Gill’s works exhibit a spirit of catholicity” by which he means “they reveal an attempt to employ the resources of the broader Christian tradition in his overall theological project.”³ Rathel points to “two examples of Gill’s use of the tradition” to make his case, namely, “his remarks on the value of the rule of faith and his reliance on the grammar provided by the patristic period in his discussions on the Trinity.”⁴ This essay will build on Rathel’s insights on Gill and the rule of faith in order to argue that Gill esteemed the Nicene Creed and found its extrabiblical language not only permissible but necessary. Green, like Rathel, also argues Gill’s “writings exhibit a spirit of Baptist catholicity that takes seriously a broader Christian tradition of

² David Rathel suggests that “[Gill’s] inclusion could only serve to further the credibility of any project that wishes to highlight the presence of a spirit of catholicity among earlier Baptists.... [Gill] offers one of the most sophisticated considerations of the tradition from any Baptist of his era.... Contemporary scholars interested in historic examples of Baptist catholicity should give his writings more attention” (“A Case Study in Baptist Catholicity: The Scriptures and the Tradition in the Theology of John Gill,” *Baptist Quarterly* 49.3 [2018]: 115–16). Christopher Green’s work cited above is already following this counsel and this essay aims to make some contribution in this direction as well.

³ Rathel, “A Case Study in Baptist Catholicity,” 109.

⁴ Rathel, “A Case Study in Baptist Catholicity,” 109.

Christian theological reflection,” and that “Gill steadfastly maintained a positive engagement with the catholic tradition.”⁵ Green, who also acknowledges building on Rathel’s work, focuses his claim of catholicity for Gill on his “use of sources in his ecclesiological writings,” specifically his “use of patristic and Reformed paedobaptist sources instead of credobaptist sources in the presentation of his ecclesiology.”⁶ Unlike Green’s work, this essay will not focus on Gill’s use of sources and their origin (whether credobaptist or paedobaptist) but will instead argue for Gill’s catholicity based on his agreement with a singular catholic source, the Nicene Creed, in its articulation of the nature of the church as one, holy, catholic, and apostolic.

It is not the aim of this essay to address the catholicity of Gill’s ecclesiological practice. Affirming the four marks of the church does not mean Gill regards each visible church as equally valid or faithful to Scripture, nor does it require that Gill interpret or understand each of the four marks in the same way a Roman Catholic or Anglican theologian might.⁷ Affirming the four marks, along with others who recognize the Nicene Creed, does provide a common ground for recognizing and articulating the fundamental characteristics of the church. If this common ground can be established, then from this commonality agreements and disagreements can be debated and discussed. Consequently, this essay will not address Gill’s views on who may participate in the Lord’s Supper in a particular church, whether baptisms performed in other churches or other denominations would be accepted as valid in his church, the extent to which various forms of church government may be justified by Scripture, or what Gill thought about sharing the pulpit with a minister of another church. Instead, this essay aims to demonstrate that John Gill affirmed in accord with the Nicene Creed that the church is one, holy, catholic, and apostolic.

In order to appreciate Gill’s ecclesiology as catholic in the sense of being in harmony with the Nicene Creed, it is necessary to begin with Gill’s stance on the rule of faith and creeds more generally from his particular position as a Baptist theologian. From there, his remarks on the unity and catholicity of the church must be observed. Finally, though they appear less frequently, his work must be plumbed for any remarks related

⁵ Green, “Baptist Catholicity in the Ecclesiology of John Gill,” 644.

⁶ Green, “Baptist Catholicity in the Ecclesiology of John Gill,” 644.

⁷ For Gill’s view of a well-ordered particular church, see the section “Of the nature of a gospel-church” especially what he says about “the *form* of it” in John Gill, *A Complete Body of Doctrinal and Practical Divinity: Or A System of Evangelical Truths, Deduced from the Sacred Scriptures*, new ed., 2 vols. (Tegg & Company, 1839), 2:559 (emphasis original).

to the holiness and apostolicity of the church. With all these pieces in place, it will be evident that Gill’s ecclesiology is Nicene while remaining Baptist. Therefore, Baptists may benefit from retrieving Gill’s Nicene ecclesiology for the purpose of ecclesiological renewal without fear of compromising the distinctives of Baptist ecclesiology.⁸

John Gill on the Rule of Faith and the Creeds

Gill does not make frequent mention of the Nicene Creed. Part of the reason for this may be an accommodation to his audience since he acknowledges early in his *Body of Divinity* that “Formulas and articles of faith, creeds, confessions, catechisms, and summaries of divine truths, are greatly decried in our age.”⁹ Gill pushes back on this spirit of the age in various ways and in Muller’s words “adopts an apologetic stance” in order to defend their use.¹⁰ For example, Gill cites several passages of Scripture, including the *locus classicus* of the analogy of faith, Rom 6:17, when he argues, “Mention is made in the New Testament of a form of doctrine delivered, and a form of sound words that had been heard and was to be held fast, and of a proportion or analogy of faith.”¹¹ He also argues for the reliability of the Apostles’ Creed and the existence of a rule of faith when he says, “The apostles’ creed might not be composed by [the apostles themselves], nor so early as their time; yet the substance of it was agreeable to their doctrine, and therefore called theirs; and there was a *regula fidei*, a rule of faith, very near it in words, received, embraced, and professed very early in the Christian church.”¹² Gill does not see this early

⁸ Green makes a similar point while arguing for Gill’s ecclesiological catholicity from a different angle than the one pursued in this essay. He says, “Gill steadfastly maintained a positive engagement with the catholic tradition in light of his Baptist distinctives, a methodological approach in which we may discern a certain depth of commitment to catholicity. Gill thus provides a helpful model for contemporary Baptist theologians, charting a path that, I will argue, is worthy of emulation” (“Baptist Catholicity in the Ecclesiology of John Gill,” 644).

⁹ John Gill, *A Complete Body of Divinity*, 1:viii.

¹⁰ 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 (Brill, 1997), 57. For a more detailed look at Gill’s response to the shifts in theology he faced in his day see the context of this quote where Muller says that Gill’s is “a theology written in the wake of the Pietist critique of orthodoxy and, closer to home for Gill, of the latitudinarian spirit and increasingly eclectic philosophizing of the late seventeenth and early eighteenth century” (p. 57).

¹¹ Gill, *A Complete Body of Divinity*, 1:x.

¹² Gill, *A Complete Body of Divinity*, 1:xi.

development of doctrinal summaries as problematic but as a positive good.

David Rathel notes that the “digression on the rule of faith at the beginning of Gill’s systematic theology is rather unusual for a work by an eighteenth-century Baptist minister,” which highlights its significance for our purposes.¹³ Indeed, Rathel goes on to say that “the significance Gill places on the tradition becomes apparent when one considers the frequency with which the terms analogy or rule of faith appear in his works.”¹⁴ Evidently this was of some importance to Gill.

Gill also addresses something that Rathel says “appears to be a crude form of Biblicism” that opposes the use of words not explicitly found in Scripture.¹⁵ Since the Nicene Creed uses extrabiblical terminology, this criticism would certainly apply to any affirmation of this creed. Gill notes this criticism when he says, “It is strongly pleaded that articles and confessions of faith, in which men are to agree, should be expressed in the bare words of the sacred Scriptures, and that nothing should be considered as a fundamental article that is matter of controversy.”¹⁶ Gill responds by producing a list of reasons why this position is untenable. First, though, he asserts both the unique position accorded to Scripture and the impossibility of explaining the meaning of Scripture without using words not found in Scripture itself. Here is how Gill puts it: “Though we ought to entertain the highest esteem of the words of Scripture . . . yet our sense of them cannot be expressed but in words literally varying from them.”¹⁷ In other words, Gill sees the practice of using extrabiblical vocabulary as not only permissible but necessary.

The reason for this insistence on the necessity of using words other than those in Scripture in order to explain Scripture is made clear through one simple example Gill provided, which has undoubted connections to the Nicene Creed. Gill argues that if only the words of Scripture are allowed to be used, then “an Arian cannot be known from an Athanasian; both will say in the words of the Scripture that Christ is the *great God*, the *true God*, and *over all God blessed for ever*; but without expressing themselves

¹³ Rathel, “A Case Study in Baptist Catholicity,” 111.

¹⁴ Rathel, “A Case Study in Baptist Catholicity,” 112. In a footnote he provides his count: “According to my counting, Gill uses the phrase analogy of faith in the content I describe here a total of 31 times in all of his published writings. References to it often appear in his biblical commentaries, particularly his commentaries on the New Testament” (“A Case Study in Baptist Catholicity,” 112n16).

¹⁵ Rathel, “A Case Study in Baptist Catholicity,” 113.

¹⁶ Gill, *A Complete Body of Divinity*, 1:xii.

¹⁷ Gill, *A Complete Body of Divinity*, 1:xii.

in their own words, their different sentiments will not be discerned.”¹⁸ The connection to the Nicene Creed is clear since that creed was written specifically for this purpose: to differentiate between Arianism and orthodox Christology. Without naming the Nicene Creed for his potentially creed-resistant audience, he affirms the rightness of the Nicene formulation being made in words outside of Scripture in order to defend the true meaning of Scripture from the distortion of the Arians who quoted the same Scriptures but interpreted them in a radically different manner.¹⁹

Furthermore, Gill suggests the desire to hide unorthodox views may be exactly why some argue for the use of Scripture words only: “Indeed this seems to be the grand reason why it is urged with so much vehemence, by some, that only Scripture words and phrases should be made use of, that their erroneous tenets may not be detected and exposed.”²⁰ Gill even notes the particular word used in the Nicene Creed that was at the root of the difference between these two groups when he says, “The Athanasians had as good a right to use the word *ὁμοουσιος* as the Arians *ὁμοιουσσιος*, and thereby explain their sense and defend their doctrine concerning the person of Christ, and his equality with God, against the latter, who introduced a phrase subversive of it.”²¹ If Gill were trying to distance himself from the reliability of the Nicene Creed, he is certainly doing a poor job of it.²² On the contrary, it is clear to those familiar with that creed that Gill is talking about it without naming it.²³ Therefore,

¹⁸ Gill, *A Complete Body of Divinity*, 1:xiv.

¹⁹ David Rathel notes Gill’s use of “significant fourth century theologians” (p. 70) and that he “drew from the broader Christian tradition, particularly the rich period of the fourth century” (p. 66) but does not seem to see this as a nod to the Nicene Creed itself which was formulated and defended in that same century (“John Gill and the Rule of Faith: A Case Study in the Baptist Retrieval of Tradition,” *STR* 14.2 [Fall 2023]: 66, 70).

²⁰ Gill, *A Complete Body of Divinity*, 1:xiv.

²¹ Gill, *A Complete Body of Divinity*, 1:xv.

²² Muller notes that “Gill’s reliance on . . . older theologies for doctrinal models was far more profound than his sometimes scanty references indicate, given the strong and clear echoes of the older Reformed theology in his prolegomena and in his Christology, even in places where no references appear.” If that is true it supports the contention here that Gill is alluding to the Nicene Creed even if he does not name or reference it directly here (“John Gill and the Reformed Tradition,” 67).

²³ Gill does mention the council of Nicaea by name four times in *A Complete Body of Doctrinal and Practical Divinity*. For these three references see pages 1:xv (in

Rathel does not go too far when he says that according to Gill, “When interpreting Scripture and constructing one’s theology, one gains assistance from the manner in which the church universal has expressed the teaching of Scripture, especially in such documents as the creeds.”²⁴ One could even suggest that Rathel’s analysis could go further in making explicit what Gill leaves implicit, namely, his support for the Nicene Creed with its extrabiblical language.

On John Gill’s Interpretive Method

Before turning to Gill’s exegetical and theological comments on particular texts and truths of Scripture, it is worth noting some particular features of his method of interpreting Scripture as it relates to theology and the rule of faith. Thomas Ascol is one of the few to write directly about Gill’s method of interpretation and notes that “perhaps the distinguishing characteristic of Gill’s New Testament exegesis is its overtly theological orientation.”²⁵ This is not only because Gill wrote both a systematic theology and a commentary covering the whole Bible. Rather, Ascol goes on to say that “Gill’s theological understanding always informed his exegesis by operating as the framework for biblical interpretation.”²⁶ This “framework” should be kept in mind when reading Gill’s comments on the text of Scripture. More specifically, Ascol argues that “the analogy of faith plays a crucial role in Gill’s exegetical method.”²⁷

a footnote), 1:229, 2:581, and 2:685. He also mentions the Nicene Creed by name once but only to argue that the descent into hell was “foisted into [the creed] in later times” (*Body of Divinity*, 577). This passage is also referenced by Colton Strother, “Reconsidering John Gill as a Baptist Heir of Reformed Orthodoxy: A Historical and Theological Account,” (PhD diss., Midwestern Baptist Theological Seminary, 2023), 202. David Rathel suggests that a reference to the Nicene Creed occurs in a passage from Paraeus quoted by Gill, but he offers no indication where this reference to the “Nicene Symbol” occurs in the quotation and it is not immediately obvious (“A Case Study in Baptist Catholicity,” 111). Caleb Hawkins, covering some of the same ground in his article that is being covered here (as any who evaluate Gill on the creeds must), also acknowledges, “Though Gill does not identify the Nicene Creed by name here, the ‘articles of faith’ he describes are clearly a reference to the Nicene Creed” (“Defining the Faith: Contrasting Philip Doddridge and John Gill’s Approaches to the Creedal Tradition,” *The Hanover Review* 2.1 [March 2024]: 58).

²⁴ Rathel, “A Case Study in Baptist Catholicity,” 112.

²⁵ Thomas K. Ascol, “John Gill’s Approach to New Testament Exposition,” in *The Life and Thought of John Gill (1697–1771): A Tercentennial Appreciation*, ed. Michael A. G. Haykin (Brill, 1997), 124.

²⁶ Ascol, “John Gill’s Approach to New Testament Exposition,” 124.

²⁷ Ascol, “John Gill’s Approach to New Testament Exposition,” 125.

John Gill on the Unity of the Church

One of Gill’s favorite texts for describing the church is Heb 12:23 which speaks of “the assembly of the firstborn who are enrolled in heaven.”²⁸ This passage, which he understands to refer to the universal church, appears over and over in his writings. He distinguishes between a local church (which he calls “particular”) and the universal church when he says, “This church is but one, though particular churches are many: to this may be applied the words of Christ; *My dove, my undefiled, is but one*, Cant. 6:9; and this is what sometimes is called by divines, the invisible church.”²⁹ The invisible church is the universal church and this universal church is not only united but “one” just as the Nicene Creed declares.

Given the significance of the theme of the unity of the church in Paul’s letter to the Ephesians, it is no surprise that Gill has much to say about the unity or oneness of the church in his commentary on that epistle. Commenting on Eph 1:23 which says, “[the church] is his body,” Gill notes that “as an human body is but one, consisting of various members, united to each other, . . . so the church of Christ is but one general assembly.”³⁰ By “general assembly” he indicates that Paul is speaking of the universal church which Gill notes is “one.”

Regarding the statement in Eph 2:21 that “the whole structure [which] grows into a holy temple in the Lord,” Gill argues that Paul’s image of a growing temple “is to be understood of all the saints, and people of God; of the whole universal church, which is God’s building; and is a building of a spiritual nature, and will abide for ever.”³¹ The reality of the church’s oneness or unity is present in the words “all” and “whole” as well as the image of a single “building.”

Commenting on Eph 4:3, which says, “Eager to maintain the unity of the Spirit in the bond of peace,” Gill notes that, “There is an union between God and his people, and between Christ and his members, and between saints and saints, and the bond of each union is love; and that it is which knits and cements them together; and it is the last of these which is here intended: the saints are united under one head, and are members

²⁸ Unless found in a quote from a work of John Gill, all Scripture quotations are from the English Standard Version (ESV) (Crossway, 2016).

²⁹ Gill, *A Complete Body of Divinity*, 2:560. “Cant.” is an abbreviation for “Canticles,” another term for the Song of Solomon.

³⁰ Gill, *An Exposition of the New Testament*, 3 vols., The Baptist Commentary Series (Mathews and Leigh, 1809), 3:68.

³¹ Gill, *An Exposition of the New Testament*, 3:77.

of one and the same body.”³² In other words, Gill sees in this text a reference to the unity of the church, “between saints and saints” and again uses the word “one” to describe this unity.

Perhaps Gill’s lengthiest comments on the oneness of the church come just one verse later as he comments on the phrase in Eph 4:4, “there is one body,” noting,

It is called *one* with relation to Jews and Gentiles, who are of the same body, and are reconciled in one body by Christ, and are baptized into it by the spirit; and with respect to saints above and saints below, who make up one general assembly; and with regard to separate societies; for though there are several particular congregations, yet there is but one church of the first-born, whose names are written in heaven; and saints of different ages, places, states, and conditions, are all one in Christ Jesus, who is the one, and only head of this body: and this is an argument to excite the saints to unity of spirit; since they are, as one natural body is, members one of another, and therefore should not bite and devour one another; they are one political body, one kingdom, over which Christ is sole King and lawgiver, and a kingdom divided against itself cannot stand; they are one economical body, one family.³³

Again and again in this passage, Gill notes the oneness of the church. He repeatedly uses the word “one” to emphasize the unity of the whole church under the headship of Christ her king.

John Gill on the Catholicity of the Church

Closely related to the unity of the church is the catholicity of the church. Though some later Baptists denied (and some today still deny) the reality of the universal church, Gill had no hesitation in affirming that the church is catholic. He is quite clear about what he means by the small “c” catholic church when he says, “the church catholic, or universal, . . . consists only of God’s elect, and of all of them, in all times and places; and reaches even to the saints in heaven: this church is invisible at present, and will never fail.”³⁴ So the catholic church is the universal church, the invisible church which consists of all God’s elect in heaven and on earth. Gill believes this is the church Christ is speaking of in Matthew 16 when he says, “I will build my church and the gates of hell shall not prevail against it” (Matt 16:18). Gill comments that this church is not “a particular congregated church, but the elect of God, the general assembly and

church of the first-born, whose names are written in heaven; and especially such of them as were to be gathered in, and built on Christ, from among the Jews and Gentiles.”³⁵ This is the church not only “built on Christ” but that Christ himself promises to build.

In addition to affirming that Scripture itself affirms the reality of the universal church, Gill also notes that this truth is affirmed by Polycarp, Irenaeus, and Origen. Before mentioning these luminaries of the early church Gill says, “The church may be said to be catholic, or general, as it may consist of such in any age, and in the several parts of the world, who have true faith in Christ, and hold to him the head, and are baptized by one Spirit into one body; have one Spirit, one Lord, one faith, one baptism, and one God and Father of all.”³⁶ Christopher Green argues that based on this passage and what follows, “We can safely note that Gill explicitly defines catholicity as a category in his dogmatic system, that this catholicity describes the church in every age, and that it includes a oneness of faith.”³⁷ Gill goes on to say, “And this is the church which Polycarp called, the whole catholic church throughout the world: and Irenæus, The church scattered throughout the whole world to the ends of the earth: and Origen, The church of God under heaven: and this is the church built on Christ the rock, against which the gates of hell shall never prevail.”³⁸ These great thinkers and theologians confessed the universal or catholic church just as Gill is doing. He goes on to add, “Such a church Christ has always had and will have; and which may be, when there is no visible particular congregated church, or a particular church gathered according to gospel-order; and of this the apostle seems to speak, when he says, *Unto him be glory in the church, by Christ Jesus, throughout all ages, world without end*, Eph. 3:21.”³⁹ Gill affirms that the church against which the gates of hell shall not prevail is the catholic or universal church. Then Gill indicates that Paul’s statement in Eph 3:21 about Christ receiving glory in the church also refers to the church as a whole, the catholic church. Notice that Gill himself does not shy away from using the term “catholic” to describe the universal church just as the Nicene Creed does.

Gill’s comments on the catholicity of the church are not limited to his exposition of Ephesians. In his comments on 2 Cor 11:2, which says, “I betrothed you to one husband,” Gill notes that “Christ stands in the relation of an husband to the church catholic and universal; to the whole

³⁵ Gill, *An Exposition of the New Testament*, 1:184.

³⁶ Gill, *A Complete Body of Divinity*, 2:561.

³⁷ Green, “Baptist Catholicity in the Ecclesiology of John Gill,” 647.

³⁸ Gill, *A Complete Body of Divinity*, 2:561.

³⁹ Gill, *A Complete Body of Divinity*, 2:561.

³² Gill, *An Exposition of the New Testament*, 3:86.

³³ Gill, *An Exposition of the New Testament*, 3:86–87 (emphasis original).

³⁴ Gill, *An Exposition of the New Testament*, 3:480.

general assembly and church of the first-born, whose names are written in heaven; even to all the elect of God, that ever were, are, or shall be.”⁴⁰ Though Paul is addressing a particular local church in Corinth, Gill notes that Christ is husband not to this one particular church but to the one “whole” catholic church.

If someone were to ask Gill, “Where does this universal church assemble since the very word ‘church’ means ‘assembly’?” we do not have to wonder how Gill might respond. In his comments on Heb 12:23 he addresses the assembly of the catholic church this way: “They met together, in the infinite mind of God, from all eternity; and in Christ, their head and representative, both then and in time; and at the last day, when they are all gathered in, they’ll meet together personally; and a joyful meeting it will be.”⁴¹ The universal church has assembled already in the mind of God and will assemble in person at the return of Christ. The fact that it does not and cannot assemble in the present does not negate its reality or make it inappropriate to call it the church.

Although Gill expounded on all of the Bible, he published a distinct work on the Song of Solomon where in accord with a long history of interpretation he recognizes a picture of the relationship between Christ and the church. It is not surprising that much of what Gill believes about the church is articulated in this commentary. For example, on Song of Solomon 6:9, “My dove, my perfect one, is the only one, the only one of her mother,” Gill notes that this refers in part to “the church’s unity in herself,” and goes on to list seven aspects of the church’s unity.⁴² Again in his comments on verse twelve of the following chapter he says, “There are several separate, distinct, and congregated churches; though these all make up but one catholic church, one ‘general assembly and church of the firstborn, which are written in heaven.’”⁴³ Once again he references Heb 12:23 and asserts the catholicity and unity of the church.

John Gill on the Holiness and Apostolicity of the Church

While describing the church, Gill also highlights the holiness of the church, though he does not dwell on this at great length like he does the unity and catholicity of the church. For example, in his comments on the

⁴⁰ Gill, *An Exposition of the New Testament*, 2:826.

⁴¹ Gill, *An Exposition of the New Testament*, 3:480.

⁴² John Gill, *An Exposition of the Book of Solomon’s Song: Commonly Called Canticles* (William Hill Collingridge, 1854), 245–46. The seven aspects of unity he mentions are: “She is but one body ... she has but one Spirit ... she has but one Head and Husband ... they enjoy the same privileges ... they make a profession of one and the same faith ... they are one in worship ... [and] they are one in affections.”

⁴³ Gill, *An Exposition of the Book of Solomon’s Song*, 317.

husband calling his bride “my perfect one” in Song of Solomon 5:2, Gill notes that “it may then seem strange, that Christ should call his church, and that in her present circumstances, his undefiled one: and so she is not in herself, but as considered in him.”⁴⁴ Gill acknowledges that the church may not appear holy or “undefiled” since “believers themselves are not free from pollution; but complain of the uncleanness of their hearts and lips.”⁴⁵ At the same time, Gill affirms that by virtue of her position in Christ she is pure and “undefiled,” and therefore holy. When describing the nature of the church, Gill argues that “such who are proper materials of a gospel church, are such who are called out of a state of bondage to sin, Satan, and the law, into the liberty of the gospel; and out of darkness into marvellous light; and are called with a holy calling, and called to be saints.”⁴⁶ Churches are to be made of holy people. Why? Gill goes on to say,

Such are not only called to be saints, but in and by effectual vocation become really saints, at least are judged to be so, by a charitable discretion of them; so the members of the churches at Rome, Corinth, Ephesus, Philippi, and Colosse, are described as saints, and sanctified persons, and as holy temples, built for habitations of a holy God; hence they are called churches of the saints, because they consist of such; and Christ, who is King and head of the church, is called King of saints.⁴⁷

The members of churches should be holy because the church is the dwelling place of God and God is holy. Gill also urges that members of particular churches should be holy. He says, “The materials of a gospel church should be men of holy lives and conversations; holiness both of heart and life becomes the house of God, and those who are of it; none should have a place in it but such.”⁴⁸

As with the holiness of the church, in comparison with his frequent and lengthy comments on the unity and catholicity of the church, Gill’s comments on the apostolic nature of the church are less conspicuous. Gill is given a clear opportunity to address the apostolic nature of the church in his comments on Eph 2:19–20, which speaks of “the household of God, built on the foundation of the apostles and prophets, Christ Jesus himself being the cornerstone.” Yet Gill rushes to say that “not the persons of the apostles and prophets, nor their doctrines merely, are here

⁴⁴ Gill, *An Exposition of the Book of Solomon’s Song*, 185.

⁴⁵ Gill, *An Exposition of the Book of Solomon’s Song*, 185.

⁴⁶ Gill, *A Complete Body of Divinity*, 2:563.

⁴⁷ Gill, *A Complete Body of Divinity*, 2:563.

⁴⁸ Gill, *A Complete Body of Divinity*, 2:564.

meant; but Christ who is contained in them, and who is the foundation on which the church, and all true believers are built.”⁴⁹ Gill does not seem eager to expound on the church’s connection to the apostles. He is more eager to connect the church to Christ than his apostles, which of course represents the emphasis Paul places on Christ as the “cornerstone.”

The same impulse is evident in his comments on Acts 2:42 where Luke says that the believers in Jerusalem “devoted themselves to the apostle’s teaching.” Gill says that the teaching of the apostles “is the same with the doctrine of Christ, of which he is the author, preacher, and subject.”⁵⁰ The same emphasis is found again commenting on Rev 21:14 where the new Jerusalem is described as having twelve foundations on which are written the names of the twelve apostles. Gill says, “Christ is the one and only foundation of his church and people ... but because he has been ministerially laid as the foundation, by the twelve apostles, for men to build their present and future happiness upon, therefore the foundations of the wall of salvation are said to be twelve.”⁵¹ His use of the word “ministerially” here may help to explain why he so frequently moves quickly from the role of the apostles to Christ himself. It is not that the role of the apostles in the establishment of the church is unimportant, but that it is ministerial and therefore secondary to Christ’s.

In this same spirit, Gill affirms the importance of the office of apostle in the church. He says of the apostles,

These had the first and chief place in the church.... They had their call and mission from Christ, and were not of men, nor by men, but by Jesus Christ; and as they had their mission and commission immediately from Christ, so their doctrine; they neither received it from men, nor were taught it, but had it by the revelation of Christ.⁵²

Once again Gill is quick to connect the apostles and their doctrine directly to Christ. Then he goes on to say about the office of apostle and any potential successors, “This office is now ceased; the apostles have no successors in it: not such who are called lord bishops; for as the apostles had not their pompous titles, nor their grandeur, nor their wealth, so neither have these lordly bishops their gifts, power, and authority; they have neither mission nor commission, nor work similar to theirs.”⁵³ Gill not only denies that the later bishops were the successors of the apostles but makes

⁴⁹ Gill, *An Exposition of the New Testament*, 3:77.

⁵⁰ Gill, *An Exposition of the New Testament*, 2:162.

⁵¹ Gill, *An Exposition of the New Testament*, 3:861.

⁵² Gill, *A Complete Body of Divinity*, 2:574.

⁵³ Gill, *A Complete Body of Divinity*, 2:574.

an incisive comparison between the apostles and these later bishops.⁵⁴

The reason for this reticence to connect the church to the apostles appears to be his rejection of apostolic succession and the primacy of Peter. Not only does Gill contrast the apostles with later bishops, but he also denies that Peter is the rock Christ builds his church upon in Matt 16:18. Gill says, “By the *rock* on which Christ builds his church, is meant, not the person of Peter; for Christ does not say, upon thee Peter, but upon *this* rock, referring to something distinct from him.”⁵⁵ Why then call Peter a rock at all? “He is so called because of his trust and confidence in the Lord, on whom he was built; but not because he was the foundation on which any others, and especially the whole church, were built.”⁵⁶ Gill’s point then is that Peter alone does not make up the foundation of the church. Gill affirms that the apostles *together* are called the foundation. He says,

Tis true, he may be called the foundation, as the rest of the twelve apostles of the Lamb are, Eph. 2:20; Rev. 21:14 without any distinction from them, and preference to them; they and he agreeing in laying doctrinally and ministerially Christ Jesus as the foundation of faith and hope, but not in such sense as he is; neither he, nor they, are the foundation on which the church is built, which is Christ, and him only.⁵⁷

But when Gill inevitably addresses the association of Christ’s words to Peter and the claim of the Pope, Gill does not mince words. “After all, what is this to the pope of Rome, who is no successor of Peter’s? Peter, as an apostle, had no successor in his office; nor was he bishop of Rome.”⁵⁸ So Gill affirms the apostolic nature of the church but is careful to distinguish his understanding of apostolicity from those who include apostolic succession or the primacy of Peter as elements of what it means for the church to be apostolic.

At one point, Gill seems to indicate that some form of congregationalism, which is common among Baptists, where the congregation plays a role in selecting or electing church leaders can be traced back to the apostles. He notes, “Clemens Romanus, who lived at the latter end of the apostolic age, says, the apostles appointed proper persons to the office of

⁵⁴ It is not clear whether Gill has the bishops of the past or of his own day in mind, but the present “are” may be an indication that he intends a reference to those of his own day.

⁵⁵ Gill, *An Exposition of the New Testament*, 1:184.

⁵⁶ Gill, *An Exposition of the New Testament*, 1:184.

⁵⁷ Gill, *An Exposition of the New Testament*, 1:184.

⁵⁸ Gill, *An Exposition of the New Testament*, 1:184.

the ministry, *with the consent or choice of the whole church*; and this practice continued to the third century.”⁵⁹ Gill then notes this practice took place with Cyprian, Cornelius, and Fabianus before bringing in the council of Nicaea: “The council of Nice, in the beginning of the fourth century, in their synodical epistle, to the churches in Egypt, ordered, that when any were removed by death, their places should be filled up by others, provided they were worthy, and such as the people chose; the bishop of Alexandria agreeing to and confirming the choice.”⁶⁰ Gill is thus connecting a distinctive emphasis of Baptist ecclesiology, congregationalism, to apostolic practice while denying that apostolicity means affirming the claim of apostolic succession and the primacy of Peter.⁶¹ Gill is not rejecting the apostolic nature of the church, but he does appear to reject certain ways of explaining what it means for the church to be apostolic. He affirms the doctrinal connection between the church and the apostles since the apostles are the ambassadors of Christ, but he denies that the church’s connection to the apostles is maintained through any form of apostolic succession. In a more positive sense, Gill seems to hint at apostolic precedent being observed rather than added to when he mentions “the ordinances of Christ, which every true Christian should be zealous for, that they be kept as they were first delivered, without any innovation or corruption.”⁶² Gill affirms an apostolic church free of later “innovation” or additions.

Conclusion

Gill defended the suitability of and even the importance of the creeds. More than that, he repeatedly emphasized the oneness or unity of the church and argued strongly for the catholicity of the church. These are deep wells that those who are engaged in expounding and encouraging Baptist catholicity would do well to draw from with greater frequency. One could wish Gill had said more about the holiness and apostolicity of the church, but he said enough to show he affirmed the confession of the church’s holiness and its apostolic nature provided these were properly understood. In these areas too, Gill may prove a helpful guide for carefully articulating a Nicene ecclesiology without forfeiting Baptist distinctives.

⁵⁹ Gill, *A Complete Body of Divinity*, 2:581 (emphasis original).

⁶⁰ Gill, *A Complete Body of Divinity*, 2:581.

⁶¹ Though it does not have a direct bearing on the argument made in this essay, Christopher Green’s observation that “John Gill’s ecclesiological writings . . . lack a single citation to a Baptist source,” is also significant (“Baptist Catholicity in the Ecclesiology of John Gill,” 652).

⁶² Gill, *A Complete Body of Divinity*, 2:524.