



WILLIAM  
**GADSBY**

B. A. RAMSBOTTOM

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# WILLIAM GADSBY

B. A. Ramsbottom

“Unto me, who am less than the least of all saints,  
is this grace given, that I should preach among  
the Gentiles the unsearchable riches of Christ”  
(Ephesians 3. 8)

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Above all I thank the Lord for all His help and pray that this biography of William Gadsby will be to His honour and glory.

B.A. Ramsbottom

\* \* \*

As these terms appear so often in the book, we feel it necessary to give a very simple and brief explanation.

#### ANTINOMIANISM

From *anti* (against) and *nomos* (law), meaning literally “against the law.” It was used of those who believe the gospel, not the law, is the believer’s rule of life – usually in a critical or even offensive way, suggesting they contended a believer could live as he wanted. In this sense William Gadsby was constantly (and unjustly) spoken of as an Antinomian.

#### FULLERISM

In 1785 Andrew Fuller published a book *The Gospel Worthy of All Acceptation*, which produced much controversy among the Baptists, ministers and churches taking different sides. The controversy became known as “the modern question.” Andrew Fuller (1754-1815) of Kettering was a well-known Baptist minister.

“Fullerism” (as it became known) contended for redemption that was only limited by purpose and application; that Christ must be offered to all, and that it is their duty to believe.

William Gadsby was an inveterate opponent of Fullerism, believing it was contrary to Scripture and dishonouring to God. The famous Abraham Booth (1734-1806) also wrote against Fuller, and later William Rushton of Liverpool. Their contention was that in addition, he was not clear on substitution and imputation in the work of redemption.

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## INTRODUCTION

The amazing thing is that, over one hundred and fifty years after his death, no real biography of William Gadsby has appeared. We say no *real* biography because the production by his son John immediately after his father's death is most unsatisfactory and inadequate – a few scattered fragments hastily thrown together, as he himself describes it.

Yet in his day the popularity of William Gadsby was immense. As early as 1829, in the religious census of that year, a number of Baptists were registering as “Gadsbyites” or “Gadsby Baptists.”<sup>1</sup> The historian Clyde Binfield has contended in the *Baptist Quarterly* that Gadsby was “no less important in his way ... than Bunyan.”<sup>2</sup> The fact that C.H. Spurgeon, in a sermon preached fifteen years after Gadsby's death, could say, “We would speak as Mr. Gadsby did,” implies that the large New Park Street congregation needed no explanation as to who Gadsby was. “The famous Calvinistic Baptist minister,” Spurgeon was to write at a later date. “We venerate Gadsby's memory.”<sup>3</sup>

Why then has William Gadsby's remarkable life story never been told? There are a number of reasons, but two particularly:

1. John Gadsby's influence in his own circle was so extensive that, as long as he lived, it was unthinkable that anyone should be so bold as to attempt the task. And John Gadsby outlived his father almost fifty years. After John Gadsby's death there were few who possessed any details of his father's life. But,

2. Compiling a biography of William Gadsby at first seems almost an impossibility. He himself left virtually nothing in writing about his own life. But as much as the lack of any systematic account, the problem lies in the sheer hoard of material that lies hidden away – odd references, little stories and old memories, hidden in sermons, magazines, biographies,

even newspapers, books and political pamphlets. There are hundreds, if not thousands of these references – invariably with no date and often not even the place. Even the source is often unidentifiable, especially in the numerous letters published in the old magazines, some anonymous, others merely signed with an initial or pen name. Ploughing through all this material has been a marathon task (howbeit pleasurable) during the past twenty to thirty years.

Despite its shortcomings, it has been necessary to rely to a degree on John Gadsby's original memoir, though in places it is not certain how reliable it is.

Dr. J.H. Philpot wrote, "Eventually the time will no doubt come when it will be generally admitted that for natural gifts, sterling qualities, and the extensive influence he wielded over the hearts of men, William Gadsby was one of the most remarkable men of his generation."<sup>4</sup> We hope this book will help to bring J.H. Philpot's prophecy into fruition. We are certain that the chief reason why some men have attained fame after their death is because of the excellence of their biographies. David Brainerd and Robert Murray M'Cheyne were excellent men; but how widespread would their fame have been apart from the superb biographies by Jonathan Edwards and Andrew Bonar?

If it be asked, "What is the thrust of the book?" our chief desire has been to tell, in an interesting way, the story of the remarkable life of a most godly man and minister.

Gadsby himself would have been well content to be forgotten. "Less than the least" was his opinion of himself, and the only way he asked to be remembered was in his own epitaph:

"Here rests the body of a sinner base,  
Who had no hope but in electing grace;  
The love, blood, life and righteousness of God  
Was his sweet theme, and this he spread abroad."

I

The Early Years  
1773 - 1805

Immortal honours rest on Jesus' head;  
My God, my Portion, and my Living Bread;  
In Him I live, upon Him cast my care;  
He saves from death, destruction and despair.

He is my Refuge in each deep distress;  
The Lord my strength and glorious righteousness;  
Through floods and flames He leads me safely on,  
And daily makes His sovereign goodness known.

My every need He richly will supply;  
Nor will His mercy ever let me die;  
In Him there dwells a treasure all divine,  
And matchless grace has made that treasure mine.

O that my soul could love and praise Him more,  
His beauties trace, His majesty adore;  
Live near His heart, upon His bosom lean;  
Obey His voice, and all His will esteem.

*William Gadsby*

## CHAPTER 1

### THE YOUNG BOY

“His decree who formed the earth  
Fixed my first and second birth;  
Parents, native place, and time,  
All appointed were by Him.”

*John Ryland (Gadsby's 64)*

As the train glides out of Nuneaton's busy main-line station, the traveller catches sight of two streets, “William Street” and “Gadsby Street,” both named in honour of William Gadsby. But Gadsby's birth was not an event to arouse any interest in Warwickshire. Indeed, not even his name was spelled correctly when his birth was registered at the ancient, pinnacled St. Nicholas' Church:

“WILLIAM, SON OF JOHN GADGBY, WAS BAPTIZED  
THE 17th DAY OF JANUARY, IN THE YEAR 1773.”<sup>1</sup>

It was a poor home into which William was born. John Gadsby was a poor roadman who already had seven children by his first wife, and one by Martha, his second. He was accounted one of the quietest men in the district; his wife the opposite. Their cottage stood in Attleborough, a village about a mile outside the town in those days before Nuneaton's “chimney stacks and dingy streets spread themselves” to embrace it. The cottage itself has long since been demolished, but there still exists a striking pen sketch, drawn in 1907 by one who remembered it well.

Disappointingly, next to nothing is known of the family, except that the father lived to the advanced age of 96. William Gadsby wrote a poem, “On the death of the author's father” (*Nazarene's Songs*, no. 175); he had reason to hope it was well with him. The mother died in 1807 or 1808 and her son took her funeral sermon at Attleborough.

The Gadsby children were left to run about the village, barefoot, ragged and almost wild, till they were old enough to



William Gadsby's Birthplace, Attleborough

work, and William was not an exception. Other children followed in quick succession (there were fourteen in all) and as soon as William could hold a child in his arms, he was expected to be a nurse to the younger children. By the time he was eight years old he had well-nigh to support himself.

Yet despite all the poverty, we catch a glimpse of a frolicsome little boy, full of mischief; up to all manner of pranks. On his last visit to Attleborough he pointed out a cottage where he plagued the life out of two prim old ladies – till at length he was drenched by a bucket of water thrown over him.

On one occasion, feeling sorry for himself, he resolved to run away from home. Stuffing old rags and straw down his back, he disguised himself as a hunchback, and left. On his anxious parents making enquiries, they were told that a boy of

similar age had been seen, but he was a hunchback. “O, no,” they said, “that could not be *our* boy.”

When a few years old, William went to the church school in Nuneaton two or three days a week. Here he was taught reading, but not writing or any English grammar. This meagre education was all he ever received so that when he began to preach, he could hardly read a chapter of the Bible correctly.

On one occasion, being late, he was eating his breakfast on his way to school. Fearful of what the master would say, and still having a piece of bread and butter uneaten, he flung it into a gravel pit. One of the boys, seeing what had happened, told the master, who immediately made William fetch it and eat it, all covered with dirt as it was. Bread was much too precious to be wasted – even if a stone stuck to it and broke one of the young schoolboy’s teeth.

It was while at school that he first had serious thoughts about God. He was dreadfully addicted to profane swearing, and at times would be horrified in his conscience with awful thoughts about wrath and condemnation. Yet still he would go on in his sinful ways. In later years he wrote:

“The natural conscience will terrify a man to distraction, but will never bring him to feel that all his sins have been against a holy, just and good God ... and that all the faults of our hearts, the whole loathsome evil workings of our minds, have been high treason against a holy God. Few, perhaps, have felt more heart-rending in the workings of the natural conscience than I have. I was in that terrible state for years; and when alone, I expected hell to open and let me in; and I thought the devil was ready to drag me to hell. I verily believe that this was all nature.”<sup>3</sup>

On one occasion he determined that he would reform. He was going to church and a lady asked him to run back to her house for her prayer book, which she had forgotten. When he brought it, she told him he was a good lad, and rewarded him with a penny. He felt confirmed that, at last, he was good. The following Sunday he really thought he *was* good. Everything seemed holy; the people were holy; the very fields were holy; even the church bells were holy! Passing through a turnip field near the church, however, he thought he would



take a turnip. He felt sure that, because he was so good, the owner would gladly have given it him. But O the horror of mind that seized him, the guilt of such a theft – and his goodness was gone!

For a time, when he had left the church school, he attended the Independent chapel with his parents. But still he continued in sinful ways, neither did all the horrors he at times felt cause him to break off. Is it any wonder that in his later life William Gadsby so strongly insisted that nothing but the grace of God can ever really change a sinner's heart?

Things seemed in a bad way, both morally and spiritually in Nuneaton at this time, though in some of the neighbouring villages a Mr. Hemmington's simple, fervent, evangelical ministry began to produce an effect.<sup>4</sup> But as for the Nuneaton clergyman? A young man, under deep conviction of sin, went to him for comfort.

"What particular sin is it that troubles you?" enquired the clergyman.

"Ah, it is heart sins, heart sins!" cried the poor, troubled man.

Finding his dictionary, the clergyman went through the 'h's, only to mutter, "I can find 'heart's ease – a plant,' but 'heart sins,' that I cannot find."

So great was the appalling ignorance and spiritual darkness among so many of the clergy at that time.

## CHAPTER 2

### THE YOUNG APPRENTICE – CONVICTION AND DELIVERANCE

“The appointed time rolls on apace,  
Not to propose but call by grace;  
To change the heart, renew the will,  
And turn the feet to Zion’s hill.”

*John Kent (Gadsby’s 76)*

The ribbon weaving industry had flourished in the Coventry-Nuneaton district since the early 1700s, having been introduced by French Protestant refugees. This was a cottage industry, the workers owning their own looms, and working in an upper room (a “top shop”) with extra large windows to allow maximum light. Like so many other of his neighbours, therefore, William Gadsby at the age of thirteen was apprenticed for about five years as a ribbon weaver to a Mr. Copson, the agreement being that he should keep half of what he earned.

During the early part of his apprenticeship, he ran to great lengths of sin and folly: swearing, lying, all manner of mischief – everything but sexual immorality from which he was mercifully delivered when his heart was set on it. Already he was appearing as a born leader, friendly, humorous, popular.

“I was a mere fool, and so full of frolic that I was the provider of sport for all my companions. I was the life of their society, and they seemed as if they could not live without me.”<sup>1</sup>

For an hour at a time, he would stand on a tub, holding forth to his fellow-workmen and keeping them roaring with laughter. When sixteen, he left a “shop of work,” but three of his companions were so distressed, saying that they too would

leave, that he was prevailed on to go back, delighted with his popularity.

“But,” he writes, “in that very shop God met me; and O the wonders of grace! all their strugglings and wrestlings were of no avail then; it could not quench what God had put in my soul.”<sup>2</sup>

It was during the year 1790 that William Gadsby believed the Lord first really began a work of grace in his heart, just after his seventeenth birthday. 1790 was the year long remembered in Warwickshire for the terrible gales (December 15) that destroyed houses and uprooted trees. But this was nothing to the storm that was going on in Gadsby’s soul.

Up to this time he believed all his religious thoughts had been natural:

“I remember, when a youth, I was not without solemn and awful twangs of conscience, expecting hell would open her mouth and let me in; and yet I do not believe that God’s Spirit had quickened my soul at that time; and though I was terribly alarmed about wrath, hell and condemnation, I would commit sin, and take pleasure therein, in order to get rid of and to stifle my miserable feelings; and many a time I have endeavoured to sing my misery away and insult God with my hardness of heart, while at the same time the terrors of hell were in my conscience. And I often wonder now that God should have put up with my impudence, with such an incarnate devil, but it was because ‘His mercy endureth for ever.’”

“But when the Lord was graciously pleased to quicken my soul, being then just turned seventeen years of age, and show me something of what sin was, I really feared it then, and a turn in my mind took place of a very different kind. I was brought to feel now that my sins were against a holy, just and good God; that I had not merely to be alarmed for the consequences and punishment due to sin, but that I had to stand before the bar of infinite purity, and give an account of my awful practices, which made my soul solemnly to tremble at the Word of God, and before the glory of His majesty!... And while I remained in this state, all the efforts I used to extricate myself only seemed to make my case worse; for every step I took appeared as though the Lord had designed

to open a fresh wound in my conscience, and only to let me experience more deeply the abominable and loathsome disease of sin.”<sup>3</sup>

What means the Lord used to bring him into this solemn state we do not know. But there was one event about this time<sup>4</sup> which left an indelible impression on his mind. This was the period when public executions were common, and the gruesome sight was a means of entertainment to many. Hearing that three men, Philips, Archer and Farnworth, were to be publicly hanged in their shrouds just outside Coventry, for housebreaking, he went; but the horrid spectacle had so dreadful an effect on his mind that he was never the same boy afterwards. One of the men was so thin and light that someone had to pull him by the heels to break his neck. Eternity rested on William Gadsby’s spirit, and he had to leave his ungodly ways. Now he had to separate from his friends, but, unwilling to lose him, a group went after him and told him they would have him, “dead or alive.” If he would not go with them, they would tear him limb from limb! So he went – only to preach to them so solemnly of hell and damnation that they were only too glad to be rid of him.

No longer would formal prayers now satisfy, or a mere repetition of the Lord’s prayer:

“I was torn to pieces with feelings of horror on account of this; and I could no more say, ‘Our Father,’ than I could leap into a burning fiery flame. I knew I had sinned against a pure and holy God; and I could not see how there was the least probability of a holy God being the Father of such an ungodly sinner as I was.”<sup>5</sup>

And again:

“When God was blessedly pleased first to put me into the fire, one of the first things He did was to burn up my prayers. I formerly was so regular in them that I durst not go to sleep till I had said what is called The Lord’s Prayer; and very often I went off in a doze before I had done, just like the poor Papist counting his beads. But now I could not even begin it. I dared not to call God, Father. What right had I to say *Our* Father? I felt there was something more in prayer than I was

possessed of. Pretty words would not do now. I felt I stood before God as a law breaker.”<sup>6</sup>

Nor would any suggestion of legal ability help:

“When I was wrestling with legal workings, a friend thought to satisfy me by putting into my hand *The Whole Duty of Man*; and when I opened it, I thought what a nice book it was. But it never gave me satisfaction for when I tried to keep up its requirements, it was too fast for me, it ran me out of breath; and there I lay, a poor crawling reptile, without any relief from *The Whole Duty of Man*. I did not then understand God’s method of salvation, nor did I know the necessity of knowing Christ crucified.”<sup>7</sup>

It was at this time that he was so deeply convinced both of the awful depravity of the heart, and the utter inability of the sinner to believe or act faith – a point on which he so solemnly insisted during his ministry:

“When God the Spirit brought me to a true knowledge of myself and my real state and condition, I felt before God that I was as destitute of Christ as are the damned in hell, as regards the manifestation and sensible enjoyment of Him. And I could no more get at Christ than I could pull God from His throne.”<sup>8</sup>

As far as possible we have sought to give William Gadsby’s deep convictions in his own words. So, brought to an extremity, he expressed his case thus:

“When God the Spirit came, and manifested sin in my conscience, and opened a little of the mystery of iniquity, I then found that all my nature and practice had been nothing less than one constant heaving up of rebellion against a holy, just and good God. And there I was, with all my sin and guilt torturing my mind, feeling myself as an accountable being to a holy God, whose mercy I had abused, whose goodness I had despised. If the blessed Spirit had not loved me with a peculiar love, He would never have taken so much pains with so hard-hearted and vile a youth as I was. No, He would have said, ‘Let him alone, let him seal his own damnation, and reap the wages due to his sin.’

“But O the mercy, the special mercy and love of our covenant God! When the set time came, He arrested me, broke my heart, and brought me to stand and bow before His throne as a guilty criminal, brought me to sign my own death warrant. I gave God leave to damn me if He would. I had nothing to offer, and I could do nothing to save myself.”<sup>9</sup>

Exactly how long William Gadsby languished in this tormented state of soul it is impossible to say. One thing is clear. It was not more than a few months. In a sermon preached not long before his death, referring to his first convictions he said, “I was a youth between seventeen and eighteen.”<sup>10</sup> In another sermon, preached not long previously, he had said concerning Christ being made known as his salvation, “Up to the time that I was nearly eighteen years of age, I was without Christ; but before I was eighteen, Christ, in distinguishing love, revealed Himself to me.”<sup>11</sup> Thus his convictions and his deliverance were during the year 1790.

His own striking account of his deliverance is as follows (though he mentions neither place nor circumstance):

“But ah! God’s peculiar love, that was shed abroad in my heart by His blessed Spirit, and which brought me to feel the love and blood of Christ, led me to trace something of the wondrous work of His wonder-working grace. Then how my hard heart was melted! I was brought to His footstool with all humility, simplicity and godly sincerity; filled with gratitude and thanks for God’s unspeakable mercies in opening these great mysteries to my poor soul. I was then solemnly and blessedly led to believe in God’s free mercy and pardon, and could look up and say, ‘He loved *me*, and gave Himself for *me*.’ I recollect the time when God was graciously pleased to reveal pardon in my poor soul at first. O! what sweetness and solemnity and blessedness there were in my poor heart! I sang night and day the wonders of His love; and I never dreamed but I should go singing all the way to heaven.”<sup>12</sup>

And again:

“My soul seemed so sweetly wrapped up in God’s pardoning mercy, and I thought He had so blessed me for evermore that

I should always possess this peace and joy, and never know sorrow again."<sup>13</sup>

Is it any wonder that in his God-honoured ministry he so often exulted in the glories of Christ and the freeness of His grace?

## CHAPTER 3

### THE YOUNG BELIEVER – BACKSLIDING AND RESTORATION

“Come, ye backsliding sons of God,  
For many such there are....  
Return to Jesus Christ, and see  
There’s mercy still for such as we.”

*Joseph Hart (Gadsby’s 806)*

During the time that William Gadsby, as a seventeen year old boy, went on his way rejoicing in Christ, “singing of the wonders of His salvation,” a close friend one day said to him, “William, we are justified freely by another, through the righteousness of Christ imputed to us.” This bewildered William. Wondering whatever “imputed righteousness” meant, he thought, “What does she mean? Is it a new doctrine?” but he dared not ask her.

Burdened in conscience he went home so concerned to know what this could be which was so necessary for his justification. He began to wonder if he was deceived, and would be lost. It was such a weight on his mind that he began earnestly to seek after a knowledge of this “imputed righteousness.” After some time, he began to wonder if it could be the perfect obedience of Christ. But then there was this word “imputed”! Again and again he said, “What can this word ‘imputed’ mean which must be our justification before God, or else without it we must sink into hell?” So, borrowing a dictionary from a neighbour, he looked up “imputed” but somehow it did not seem to help and he was plunged still deeper into confusion.

At last the Lord Himself appeared and settled the question. With power He brought home to William Gadsby’s heart the scripture: “He was made sin for us, who knew no sin, that we



might be made the righteousness of God in Him.” “O,” he cried, “I should not wonder if this is the meaning of ‘imputed,’ Christ taking our sins and giving us His righteousness.” So little by little the Lord led him into the truth and beauty of the doctrine of Christ’s imputed righteousness – “a divine transfer – a taking away of my guiltiness, and a putting upon me of the obedience of Christ so that I might stand complete before the Lord without sin. Aye,” he said, “I had believed this truth before in the spirit of it, but I did not know it was called ‘imputed righteousness.’”<sup>1</sup>

Another thing the Lord established him in was the beauty and suitability of Christ’s offices and characters. Enjoying a sweet sense of pardon of sin and reconciliation to God, feeling the power of the love and blood of Christ, he at first had little acquaintance with the offices of Christ till God brought him both to see and feel them as “blessed branches of the glorious riches of God’s grace suited to my case,”<sup>2</sup> not mere ornaments or titles of honour.

But soon trials were to come. He was very zealous but there was too much self-confidence in his religion. He even felt there could not be one in the neighbourhood to excel him in spiritual things.

“Poor wretch! So foolish was I, I began to throw my religion about everybody’s ears, and tell it to everyone. But before long, it all appeared to leave me, and I sank in ruin and misery; and when in this solemn low estate of wretchedness, my religion seemed to be nearly at an end.”<sup>3</sup>

To humble him and to teach him lessons never to be forgotten, the Lord permitted him to backslide. “I was really sincere, but this was the sincerity of *self*,” he testified. So proud was he becoming that he cut two old men off completely: one for falling asleep in prayer; the other for telling him that he should not be surprised if William should get drunk during the time of the Nuneaton Fair, “for,” he said, “you seem so much lifted up with your power to keep from it [strong drink], and the only thing in your favour is that you do not like it.”

“I looked at the poor old man as an old hypocrite,” said William Gadsby. “What? I get intoxicated, when God has been

so gracious as to stop me in my career, and give me pardon, and the sweet enjoyment of it?” But sad to say the prediction came true. And that before the week was ended!

Having to go through town with his elder brother John, they thought they would go across the fields, and so miss the Fair and the people going to it. When they reached Attleborough, John persuaded him to go into the *Three Crowns* and have a drink called “Queen’s cordial.” He had never tasted it and felt willing to try what it was like, so they only had three-halfpence worth each. But it was too much! He begged the landlady to let him go to bed, but how her words stung him: “No, I will have no drunken fellows here!” (William Gadsby in his old age was a well-known speaker on “temperance” platforms.)

What a dreadful state he came into! All his comfort, all his enjoyment gone. One night he resolved to put out his light, kneel down by his bedside, and not stop praying till God had forgiven him. Early in the morning he awoke – on his knees! So the solemn prediction of the old man he despised had come true.

“There was the sentence of death on all my joy and all my comfort; and for several months after that I walked in the very depth of agony and distress, such as I could never describe; so much so that if any child of God that knew the preciousness of Christ got into my company, I believed he would see it directly we began to converse, and go and tell all the people in the village (for I knew everybody, and they knew me), and that I should go wandering about like Cain, with a mark upon me; and so I kept out of their company.”<sup>4</sup>

How Satan roared in his soul:

“Where is your peace with God *now*? Where is your power in prayer *now*? Where are your meekness, and your humility, and your tenderness of conscience *now*? Where is your hope in the Lord *now*? Where is your trust in the God of Israel *now*? And where are YOU?”<sup>5</sup>

His self-righteousness and fleshly zeal burned up, meekly he exclaimed, “Ah, Lord, I do not know where I am, nor what I am, nor what my end will be.”

At length the Lord was pleased graciously to deliver him. In great darkness he picked up his Bible and began to read Ezekiel chapter 16. As he read through, everything seemed to tell him that *he* was the guilty, vile creature there set forth so that he sank fathoms, feeling the desperate wickedness of his nature in a way he had never done before. As he read on he exclaimed aloud, "This is my case. Whatever is this people's lot will be my lot. Damned or saved, I must go with them."

As he neared the end of the chapter, he read of the Lord's lovingkindness and tender mercy till he came to the 63rd verse: "That thou mayest remember, and be confounded, and never open thy mouth any more because of thy shame, when I am pacified toward thee for all that thou hast done, saith the Lord God." "They're safe! they're safe!" he cried out, the word entering with divine power, and his liberty was complete.

Later he wrote,

"There was a sweet serenity in my heart, a confounding of all my reasoning powers, and I was brought to wonder at God's overwhelming grace and mercy toward me."<sup>6</sup>

\*            \*            \*

When between eighteen and nineteen, he began to attend the Independent<sup>7</sup> chapel at nearby Bedworth, "black Bed'orth" as it was known on account of its wickedness. The degradation of the district seems almost unbelievable to a modern reader.

"Utterly demoralised and disorganised, poverty, unemployment and vice were rampant, the church empty and schools almost completely neglected. Cock fighting, bull-baiting, drinking, gambling, and disorders of every description had full sway, fights among the men were incessant, and even the women stripped in the streets to fight."<sup>8</sup>

Such were many parts of Britain about this time, and such was the district through which William Gadsby now wended his way week by week to worship at the old meeting house, founded in 1686 by Julius Saunders (of the same family as the renowned Coventry martyr, Lawrence Saunders).

During his attendance at Bedworth, he used to love to linger behind the old saints, eagerly listening to their

conversation, but always striving to avoid attracting notice. On more than one occasion he jumped over a hedge to avoid being seen.

He constantly dreaded anyone speaking to him on spiritual things, fearing they would detect him as a hypocrite. He said he so felt the “oozing up of filth, pollution, misery and wretchedness that I really could not compare myself to anything better than a walking devil.”<sup>9</sup>

But on one occasion, when he had to go to Coventry, a poor, godly woman saw him and called out, “Are you going to Coventry?” On hearing that he was she said, “Oh! stop a moment then for my John [her husband] is going there.” Now this John was a godly man, and William Gadsby felt he would completely see through him, so he tried to talk about trade, politics, anything but religion. However, John would not let him go. “Why do you go to the meeting house?” he enquired, and then followed with other, closer questions till bit by bit he learned what Gadsby felt, and William Gadsby felt that he was completely found out. But then John began to talk. “Who taught you this?” and, pointing out the suitability of the Word of God to such a condition, he showed that this was the way in which God led His people.

“God sweetly brought it to my heart,” said William Gadsby, “set my soul at liberty, and the Bible became a new Bible to me. It seemed to unfold mysteries that I never knew before.”<sup>10</sup>

His mother often quarrelled with him because he spent so much time trudging backwards and forwards to Bedworth.

“O Billy,” she would say, “you’re off again!” As he had only one pair of shoes, his mother warned him that he ought to go barefoot or his shoes would soon be worn out.

“Never mind, mother,” he would say, “I shall be able to keep you yet.”

So though William Gadsby’s pride and self-righteous zeal were humbled, true zeal was not extinguished; in fact it never abated till the day of his death.

On just one occasion he felt warranted to miss the prayer meeting, saying that his piece of weaving was wanted, and he could not finish if he did not keep at it. A short time later the

piece caught fire and lost him three-fold as much time as he had saved through staying at home.

But it was not with the Independents that William Gadsby was to spend his life, but with the Baptists, and circumstances were soon to arise to cause him to relinquish his connections with the Independent meeting in nearby Bedworth and throw in his lot with the congregation of Baptists in Coventry.

#### NOTE

The dating and exact order of the events in the last two chapters is very difficult. John Gadsby clearly states that it was in 1790 when William Gadsby was intoxicated. William Gadsby confirms this – “I was between seventeen and eighteen years of age” – and adds that it was in *May*. But this was sometime after his soul was set at liberty, and it is made clear that his first real convictions were sometime *after* his seventeenth birthday (January 1790). Either the time between conviction and deliverance was very short, or there is a mistake in the date of the intoxication.

Then the public hanging, mentioned as having such a deep effect in conviction, is dated *August* 1790 by John Gadsby. If so, then this must have been long *after* his deliverance.

After the passage of nearly two centuries, no one can solve this puzzle.

## CHAPTER 4

### THE YOUNG BELIEVER – BAPTISM

“His institutions would I prize;  
Take up my cross, the shame despise;  
Dare to defend His noble cause,  
And yield obedience to His laws.”

*Benjamin Francis (Gadsby's 427)*

Eight miles away in Coventry stood an old Particular Baptist meeting house dating from the late 1600s where at one time the well-known theologian, John Brine,<sup>1</sup> had been pastor. Situated in “Will Raton’s yard,” it was reached by going up number 7 court in Jordan’s Well, and was a square, red brick building with high pointed roof.

At the time William Gadsby first became interested in the chapel, John Butterworth had been pastor there for forty years. John Butterworth (1728-1803) was the son of Henry Butterworth, blacksmith of Goodshaw in the Forest of Rossendale. As a boy John had attended a school run by that remarkable preacher, David Crosley, and his four brothers were also all Particular Baptist ministers – James, pastor at Bromsgrove; Henry, at Bridgenorth; Lawrence, at Evesham; and Thomas, a supply. John, the Coventry pastor, had by this time attained the reputation of an eminent and godly minister. After his death he was remembered by a concordance he compiled. His son became a Member of Parliament, and was one of the “evangelical party” in the House of Commons.

But changes were taking place at Coventry in 1793. John Butterworth’s congregation had so increased that the old chapel was no longer large enough and in that year a new chapel was opened in Cow Lane, built behind Mr. Butterworth’s house in his garden. But, also, John Butterworth



John Butterworth

was now an old man, so in that same year a younger minister, James Aston (who later went to Chester), had come to assist him.

There were six or eight houses in Attleborough that were licensed for preaching, and these were frequently visited by James Aston to hold services. On one occasion in the year 1793, Mr. Aston was having breakfast at the house of a Mr. Richard Taylor, when who should come in but the twenty-year old William Gadsby. An interesting conversation ensued on



Cow Lane Chapel, Coventry

the point of believer's baptism, which resulted in Mr. Aston taking hold of William by the shoulder and exclaiming, "I should like to put you under the water immediately." This somewhat alarmed him, but the result was that he left the Independents and became connected with the Baptists in Coventry. From what he said in later years, only "part of the truth" was preached among the Independents at Bedworth as the feelings of God's children were not mentioned.



From then on, longing to hear the truth, it was an eight-mile walk each way to the services, wet or dry, wind or snow. It was his practice each Lord's day morning to be present for the seven o'clock prayer meeting and, as he delighted to tell his congregation in his old age, he was never late! In fact, having gone to bed one Saturday evening at about nine o'clock so as to be ready for the morning, he got up and dressed ready to set out, only to find that his sister was already up. In his surprise, he asked her why ever she had got up so early. "Go back to bed again," she replied. "It isn't eleven o'clock at night yet."

It was on one of these early walks that he prepared his "eight mile long prayer." He had often been asked to pray at the prayer meetings but through fear never thought he could – till one morning he determined not to be such a fool and to have a prayer ready. He thus speaks of it:

"They frequently asked me to pray. I felt myself so wretched, such a poor shut-up creature, that I dared not to venture. One morning I set off pretty early to Coventry, and as soon as I left the village I began to make a prayer. O the cursed pride of my fleshly mind! I thought what a pretty prayer I had made, that, if they called on me, I should be ready. When I got there, they called upon me. I attempted. But alas! all my prayer was gone. All went to ruin. I can compare myself to nothing else than to a man attempting to rob an orchard, but the boughs were too high for him. All went to ruin, and there was I left alone. The Lord would not allow me to come in this way."<sup>2</sup>

There was one old man who, in prayer, always seemed so peevish under his troubles that William Gadsby asked the Lord to let him bear some of this man's troubles for him. He was sure he could bear them better than the old man. But he often said that he never prayed for other people's troubles afterward! He soon had enough of his own.

Just before his twenty-first birthday, William Gadsby joined Mr. Butterworth's church at Cow Lane. As the old pastor was not able to baptize, he was baptized along with twenty-one others by Mr. Aston on December 29th, 1793. When he was baptized, James Aston said some good things concerning him, and (almost prophetically) said he could "see something in the

young man, although so illiterate and uncouth, that seemed blessedly to prove that he would some time or other be made very useful to God's dear family."<sup>3</sup>

We wonder if at this time Gadsby ever met George Burder (1752-1832), the well-known preacher, author of *Village Sermons* (preached round Coventry), and later Secretary of the London Missionary Society. He was at this period minister at the West Orchard Independent chapel in the city. Or did he know Jonathan Evans (1748-1809), author of the beautiful hymn, "Hark! the voice of love and mercy," a native of Coventry, who at this time was preaching at Foleshill, just outside Coventry? When in later years Gadsby compiled his selection of hymns, hymns were included by these two Coventry ministers.

We also wonder if he heard Andrew Fuller preach at Cow Lane as he was in the habit of making periodic visits. In later years Gadsby and Fuller became acknowledged as leaders of opposing trends among the Calvinistic Baptists, and it was whilst quite young that Gadsby first took up his pen to write against Fuller.<sup>4</sup>

## CHAPTER 5

### THE YOUNG HUSBAND

“True helpers may they prove indeed,  
In prayer, and faith, and hope;  
And see with joy a godly seed,  
To build Thy household up.”

*John Berridge (Gadsby's 375)*

After his baptism, William Gadsby became renowned for his zeal in the things of God. If there was any dispute going on about Arminianism and Calvinism, he was sure to be the leader. If any gracious activity was taking place, he was sure to be there. So it is not surprising to find him active at a remarkable baptizing service at nearby Hinckley.

Hinckley, though over the county boundary in Leicestershire, is only five miles from Attleborough. Here it was proposed to form a Particular Baptist church about the end of 1794.<sup>1</sup> A number of persons had been spiritually enlightened and, dissatisfied with the preaching that they listened to, eighteen were led to seek to be baptized and then unite as a little church. For the occasion the General Baptists kindly lent their chapel, but the baptistry and the well from which it was filled were in the open air in the burial ground at the back of the chapel.

When the day came, it was found that during the night both the baptistry and the well had been filled with filth with the intention of stopping the ordinance. However, undaunted by this, the friends soon cleared the baptistry and, armed with buckets, filled it again from nearby pumps. So the service was not hindered, and ten males and eight females were baptized, as arranged, by James Aston of Coventry. Among them was Elizabeth Marvin, of whom we shall hear so much later. The newly formed church met for worship in a small barn in

Comp's Yard, Bond Street, not far from the castle mound where once a Roman castle stood.

Soon after there was another baptizing service, this time taken by a London minister named Garratt. Elizabeth could not help noticing a very active young man, up to his knees in the water assisting the minister. It seems as if it was love at first sight as she felt this was the young man she would like to marry.

Not long afterwards Elizabeth went over with a few others to a meeting at Bedworth. Going into a friend's house during the afternoon, to her delight she saw the young man on whom her affections were set, sitting on the floor with a pair of bellows, blowing the fire. She then realised for the first time who he was – William Gadsby about whom she had heard so much.

William had been very friendly with a girl but became worried about his friendship as he began to see things in her of which he could not approve. He felt he must break off the friendship but was troubled how to do it honourably after it had gone on so long. Going to a prayer meeting, he pleaded with the Lord to intervene and end the friendship for him. Returning from the prayer meeting, whom should he meet but the young woman, who told him she wanted to end the relationship, and soon after she married someone else. It was not long after this that his friendship with Elizabeth Marvin began, and he often journeyed over to Hinckley to see her.

Since 1640<sup>2</sup> Hinckley had been the centre of the stocking weaving industry. In the 1720s Daniel Defoe had said "the whole county seems to be employed in it,"<sup>3</sup> and in 1782 it was said that "a larger quantity of hose was supposed to have been made here than in any town in England." At this time almost all the frames were installed in the houses of the knitters, though just before 1800 several frame-owners began to build larger rooms in which hand frames were worked – the commencement of the factory system in stocking weaving.

At the time William Gadsby moved there, "the population of the town was 5000, most of them living in abject poverty, largely uneducated stockingers, many plying their trade on frames in their wretched thatched cottages. Lawlessness was

rife. Towns people and travellers were robbed by footpads and even the London to Chester coach which passed through the town was held up and its passengers had their valuables stolen.”<sup>4</sup>

Through the influence of Elizabeth, the daughter of a stocking weaver herself, William Gadsby at the age of about twenty-two gave up ribbon weaving and became a stocking weaver. The frame at which William worked as a ribbon weaver had just been introduced to weave what was known as “eighteen-penny white satin.” He was the first ever to weave this and many persons went to see the working of the new machine. While his hands threw the shuttle backwards and forwards, his feet worked on twelve (and sometimes sixteen) different treadles, one after another. The least mistake would cause damage to the ribbon. But apart from the laboriousness of the work, he had to lean hard whilst working a “breast piece.” This made his chest so tender and he became so ill that his parents feared he would not live.

In this extremity Elizabeth made the suggestion that he give up ribbon weaving and take up stocking weaving. Accordingly in 1795 he left Attleborough and commenced a second apprenticeship in Hinckley for a Mr. Bilson, a Baptist who was also a preacher. The agreement was that Mr. Bilson should receive twenty shillings immediately, and then one shilling a week for twelve months for his instruction. William soon became master of his new trade, and his early illness seems to have had no after effects during the rest of his life.

On May 16th, 1796, William Gadsby and Elizabeth Marvin were married. William was twenty-three, Elizabeth two years older. The clergyman who married them was a very dissipated man. (This, presumably, was Rev. John Cole Galloway, a learned man, Vicar of Hinckley 1778-1804, to whom Nichols in his *History of Leicestershire* gives a very poor character. Though receiving the large stipend of £500 a year, he was always in debt.)

When they reached the clergyman’s house (the wedding was at eight o’clock in the morning), they found the servant girl blowing a few cinders and ashes to make the water boil for breakfast.

“Where’s your money?” demanded the minister, and on receiving the four shillings, “Here, clerk,” he said, “there’s the half crown I borrowed from you; and here,” turning to the girl, “is a shilling. Go straight away and buy some coal.”

In later years William Gadsby often mentioned this to show the awful state in which some of the Church of England clergy were found. Not long before he died, addressing a gathering of nearly 8,000 people in the Great Hall at Manchester, William Gadsby referred to a similar experience, when attending a funeral some time after his marriage. The Hinckley curate was in bed drunk, but took the funeral in his intoxicated state, and soon after the vicar was brought home by two men, drunk. It was events like this that made William Gadsby suspicious of the clergy of the Church of England.

When first married, Mr. and Mrs. Gadsby lived in lodgings with a godly family named Williamson in Bond End, Hinckley. All they had was a chest of drawers and an umbrella belonging to Mrs. G.; the umbrella they sold, buying a deal table with the proceeds. After about five months they took a house in Golden Fleece Yard, paying a rent of £7 a year, and stayed there for several years. William and his wife worshipped together at the barn, where he united in church membership on September 25th, 1796, having received his dismissal from the church at Cow Lane, Coventry. But soon after William Gadsby settled there, the congregation increased so rapidly that they had to take a bigger barn in what was then called Hogg Lane, later Mansion Street.

It was a busy little town where William Gadsby first set up his home. A period of real prosperity had begun in the stocking industry, and the timber-framed thatched cottages and the houses with their large upper rooms with low, wide windows were resonant with the “creak and boom of the old frames.” The town abounded with “yards” where the horses, carrying yarn or stockings, were loaded.

Apart from Hinckley’s various inns, the *George and Bull’s Head* were old coaching hostelries where the London mail coach especially brought a daily round of excitement as it came through.

The “stockingers” themselves were “characters” with their droll humour, ready wit, quaint philosophy, and lack of education – interesting companions for William Gadsby. For the rougher sort, there was cock fighting in the tavern yards, bull baiting at the Harrow farm, foot racing on the Long Shoot, boxing contests, whilst the Annual Whitsuntide Fair was entertainment for all. News of the outside world filtered through as the “stockingers” gathered round the few who could buy and read the London paper.

The well-known sacred music compiler, William Gardiner (composer of the tune *Walton*), wrote in 1810:

“The stocking maker lived in comparative ease and plenty. Each had a garden, a barrel of home-brewed ale, a work-day suit of clothes and one for Sundays. He also had plenty of leisure, seldom working for more than three days a week. Music was much cultivated by some of them.”<sup>5</sup>

John Wesley had written in 1786 of Hinckley: “A more serious, well-behaved people, I have seldom seen”;<sup>6</sup> and before that (1782) he described the place as “one of the civilest towns I have seen.”<sup>7</sup> Here a “neat, elegant preaching house” was used by the Methodists, whilst Dr. Doddridge (the eminent Independent minister and hymnwriter) had preached his first sermon to a crowded congregation from 1 Corinthians 16. 22 at the large Meeting House.

This, then, was the town where William Gadsby and his new bride were to spend the next decade of their lives. The Hinckley years form one of the most attractive periods of William’s life. Here he first set up home. Here his first three children, Rachel, Sarah and Phebe were born. And it was whilst living at Hinckley that he first preached.

## CHAPTER 6

### THE YOUNG PREACHER

“I’ll speak forth the love of my Lord,  
His praises my tongue shall employ;  
He bought me with His precious blood,  
Nor Gabriel is more loved than I.”

*William Gadsby (Gadsby’s 581)*

Preach? William Gadsby was determined that he never would. Yet he could not get the work of the ministry off his mind. From very early days he had wondered if one day he would be a preacher. Then there had been that prayer meeting at the house of a Samuel Smith in Coventry when he had felt so muddled and confused in prayer, only to be amazed when a godly old woman tapped him on the shoulder saying, “Thou’lt preach among the big boughs yet.” On this last occasion such were his feelings that he said he could have knocked the old woman down!

But now the Lord had laid fast hold of him and, wriggle as he might, he could not get rid of the weighty burden and could find no rest. He prayed that he might die rather than preach. He even sat on the cellar steps trying to catch a cold so that he might die.

Dramatically he describes these days:

“When the Lord first put into my heart a spiritual concern about preaching the gospel, a greater fool never had existence! I had been brought up in a country place where my speech was so broad that I could only say ‘mawn’ for man, and ‘cawn’ for can; and my appearance and manners were all of a piece; and as it respected literature or learning, I could not read a single chapter in the Bible. All were full of what I called hard words from beginning to end; and what with my want of learning, and want of language, and my



great ignorance, it appeared altogether the highest pitch of presumption for a fool like me to attempt to preach at all. Yet I could not get rid of the feeling....

“But I got into such a state of mind that I could not rest in my bed; and many a time I have gone into the cellar with only my night-clothes on in order to take cold, and get my death; *but I could not catch a cold for the life of me!*”<sup>1</sup>

His continual prayer was, “Do not let me preach, Lord. Send by whom Thou wilt send, but not by me.” At length he got into such a state of misery that he just did not know what to do – till the Lord finally and definitely decided the matter by powerfully applying 1 Corinthians 1. 27-29 to his heart:

“At length in the midst of my wrestling, struggling and sighing to God to know the worst of my case, and beseeching His Majesty to take the thought of preaching away from such a fool, since He knew what I was, He was pleased to apply this blessed text to me in such a way as to set me for ever at rest on this point: ‘But God hath chosen the foolish things of the world to confound the wise; and God hath chosen the weak things of the world to confound the things which are mighty; and base things of the world, and things which are despised hath God chosen, yea, and things which are not, to bring to nought things that are, that no flesh should glory in His presence.’”<sup>2</sup>

This settled the point. The word came with such power and his burden was so lifted that William Gadsby cried, “Ah, Lord, if this is the way of Thy working, Thou never hadst a better opportunity, for Thou never hadst a bigger fool to deal with.”

Over forty years later he wrote:

“My dear Lord has often proved the truth of what He declared to my soul and sealed upon my heart when He first put me in the ministry, viz.; ‘I have chosen the foolish things to confound the wise.’ Never shall I totally forget that solemn sealing-time. And since then I have proved thousands of times that the Lord’s wisdom has been made perfect in my foolishness, and His strength in my weakness. Honours crown His brow! He never forgets His promised grace, nor lets us quite forget Him.”<sup>3</sup>

Now instead of misery he felt liberty and joy in his soul, and the very next Lord's day he was asked to preach.

Since the age of twenty-one William Gadsby had often made remarks on various portions of Scripture, and many had been astonished at the way this rough-looking and clownish young man expounded the Word of God in such a powerful manner. People with wonder had begun to say, "Why, Bill Gadsby is going to begin preaching!"

But the first time he really stood up to take a text and preach was immediately following this clear deliverance. He was now twenty-five, and the date of his first sermon was Whit Sunday, 1798; the place an upper room in Millership's Yard, off Leicester Street, Bedworth, where a church had just been formed under the pastorate of John Sargent. On this memorable occasion the text was 1 Peter 2. 7: "Unto you therefore which believe, He is precious." How appropriate this text at the very commencement of that long, Christ-exalting ministry, during which he would so often exclaim, "Honours crown His head for ever!"

Having to refer to the opening verses of the Epistle, he just could not read the first and second verses, especially "the strangers scattered throughout Pontus, Galatia, Cappadocia, Asia, and Bithynia," so he rapidly slurred over the big words, saying it was enough that it meant the elect all over the world.

Nevertheless from the beginning, under God's blessing, his preaching was abundantly successful, so much so that a friend said to him, "Ah, William, thou'st come in at the south gate, but thou'lt go out at the north." At this time various Baptist academies and associations were springing up but he felt it right invariably to keep aloof from them. This he held to throughout his life.

He frequently preached in the houses of some of the people. Almost immediately after his first sermon at Bedworth, one week night he preached in the house of one Mark Chaplin in a small village named Little Burton, three miles from Hinckley. The text was: "And if the righteous scarcely be saved, where shall the ungodly and the sinner appear?" Present to hear him was a young farmer's servant named Richardson, a bigoted

member of the Church of England who hated the Dissenters bitterly and confessed that he would like to kill them. Why ever he was there he himself could never say. But that night the Word preached had such a powerful effect that his life was completely changed. At the time of William Gadsby's death forty-six years later, he was still steadfast in the truth.

Following the beginnings at Bedworth, William Gadsby's mind was so occupied with the solemn importance of preaching that at times he could not properly attend to his business. On one occasion his wife came to him, holding up a stocking he had made, and saying, "Look here, William; it's time that you gave up either preaching or weaving!" He had made the "clock" of the stocking in front instead of where it should be, at the ankle. On another occasion his wife found that he had brewed the tea without putting any tea in the pot, so that she was pouring out nothing but hot water.

Apart from his success as a preacher, William Gadsby shone as a Christian. All that knew him said that he was of "good report," that he was "exemplary, consistent, savoury, zealous and ornamental, both as a man and a Christian, in the world and in the church."<sup>4</sup>

By this time he had commenced business himself, but he was in great difficulties for want of money, and "knew what it was to thank God for a single twopence sent by a friend." Later he fared quite well. Generally he took his stockings to market himself, carrying them in a pack to Leicester, Coventry or Nuneaton.

One day, when he was very poor, he was going to Nuneaton to buy provisions for his family with all the money he had in the world, just half a crown. As he was going along, a man joined him telling a pitiful tale of distress. William walked on with him with his hand firmly in his pocket, but, to give his own words:

"I first took up sixpence, and thought I would give him that. Then I took up a shilling, and thought I would give him that, but the devil told me it was too much. I could not afford it; *but at last I gave him the whole half crown.*

"Then the devil set at me with passages of Scripture, that I was worse than an infidel, for I had neglected my family.

But I kept on walking towards the town just as if I had the money still in my pocket.

“When I got there, I met a man that I had not seen for some years. We entered into conversation, and when he went away, he shook hands with me, and left half a guinea in my hand. Then it was my turn, and I set to, and gave it the devil well.”<sup>5</sup>