



**WHO ARE WE?**

**The Gospel Standard Strict Baptists**

**By B.A. Ramsbottom**



## **WHO ARE WE? THE GOSPEL STANDARD STRICT BAPTISTS**

Who are we? This is the question that is usually asked when people come into contact with the Strict Baptists for the first time – especially when the expression “Gospel Standard Strict Baptists” is used.

Most people seem to be familiar with what a Baptist is. They know that we baptize by immersing completely in water the person being baptized, differently from those who sprinkle or pour water. They usually know that we do not baptize babies but only those who are able to profess their repentance and faith in Jesus. Even so they sometimes use the expression, wrongly, of “*adult* baptism,” whereas it is “*believers’* baptism.”

But there are so many types of Baptist, and so many shades of opinion. As is well-known, the Baptists form the largest number of Protestants in the U.S.A. Where do we stand?

Often the question is: “*Strict* Baptists? What are you ‘strict’ about?” The word “strict” is really a shortened form of the word “restricted”; that is, we restrict church membership and the Lord’s supper to those who have been baptized. There are other Baptists who practise believers’ baptism but allow to the Lord’s table (or even church membership) those who have not been baptized.

But how does the name “Gospel Standard” come in? This will appear evident as we proceed.

## BEGINNINGS

Our roots go right back to the 1630s in Charles I's England when the first Particular Baptist\* church was formed. This has usually been accepted as in London in 1633. By "Particular Baptist" is meant adhering to the Calvinistic doctrines of free and sovereign grace, "particular" referring to the extent of the atonement.

There had been General Baptist churches (i.e. Arminian, and believing in general redemption) previously. These had had contact with the Anabaptists on the continent, especially in Holland, Germany and Switzerland, who were persecuted by the Reformers. Our Particular Baptist churches had no connection with these.

The Particular Baptists and General Baptists were completely separate. In fact, many of the General Baptists turned Unitarian (denying the Trinity) and the denomination almost died out. (It was re-formed in the late 1700s.)

Where, then, did the churches spring from to which we trace our roots? Speaking very generally, this was the third step in the Reformation.

1. The glorious Reformation took place when the Church of England emerged from the darkness and death of Roman Catholicism. This was the state church, practising infant baptism, but for the most part Calvinistic in doctrine.

2. Independent churches began to appear, believing there should be no state or episcopal authority, but that each local church should be self-governing. Yet they still practised infant baptism.

3. Independent churches began to question the mode of baptism and which persons are eligible for baptism. So believers' baptism was adopted and the first Baptist churches appeared.

In the year 1644 the seven London Baptist churches published their Confession of Faith. As concerned doctrine, it closely followed the famous

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\* Really we are "Strict and Particular Baptists" – that is, practising restricted (as opposed to open) communion, and holding the Calvinistic doctrine of particular (as opposed to general) redemption. It would appear that most of the original Baptists were *both* – though the term "Strict Baptist" was not used till later.

Westminster Confession – the chief difference being believers’ baptism and the independent (rather than presbyterian) order of the churches.

Among the well-known leaders of the emerging group of churches, three especially might be mentioned.

**Hanserd Knollys (1599-1691).** A Cambridge graduate, he had been a minister in the established church. Developing Puritan ideas, he separated and had to flee to America. On returning he became pastor of one of the London churches.

**William Kiffin (1616-1701).** He came from a very different background, and as a woollen merchant (as well as pastor of a London church) became one of the wealthiest men in England. He even lent money to King Charles II and was able to use his influence for his needy brethren.

**Benjamin Keach (1640-1704).** Originating from Buckinghamshire, he moved to London and also became pastor of a Baptist church there. Keach was a voluminous writer, and his books on the parables and on Scripture metaphors are still in print. He is also remembered as the person who introduced hymnsinging among the Particular Baptist churches.

During these years the Baptists suffered bitter persecution from the state church for refusing to conform and worship in the Church of England. Of course, the best known is John Bunyan, who spent long years in prison in Bedford gaol. (Bunyan himself was baptized by immersion as a believer in the River Ouse at Bedford, but did not insist on it either as a term of communion at the Lord’s supper or for church membership.)

As an example of suffering we give two episodes in the life of Benjamin Keach.

Once when he was preaching, the dragoons were sent to break up the meeting. In the words of the Baptist historian, Ivimey:

“They came with great rage and violence upon the assembly, and swore they would kill the preacher. Accordingly he was seized, and four of the troopers declared their determination to trample him to death with their horses. Having bound him, they laid him on the ground for this purpose, and had actually prepared themselves to accomplish this horrid design. But the officer, discovering their intention, rode up to them just as they were going to spur their horses to ride over him, and interposing his authority prevented

them. He (Keach) was then taken up and tied behind one of the troopers across his horse, and carried to gaol, where he lay some time and suffered great hardships.”

At another time he was cruelly put in the pillory at Aylesbury, and again the following week, for publishing a book in which baptism by immersion was advocated.

There was another occasion when several Baptists were even sentenced to death for meeting for worship – which sentence would have been carried out had not William Kiffin been able to intercede with the king for them.

This was a very noble period in the history of our churches in their first beginnings.

## THE 1700s

In 1688 the Glorious Revolution took place. The Roman Catholic King James II had to flee the country, and William of Orange came over from Holland to become king. This brought an immense change for the English Baptists as an Act of Toleration was now passed, and so they were able to worship freely according to their conscience. The days of cruel persecution had come to an end.

The following year, 1689, the Second Baptist Confession of Faith was issued, following a national assembly called by such men as Knollys and Kiffin. This time nearly forty churches signed it, and not from London alone.

The bitter days of persecution had been days of real spiritual prosperity, but with easier circumstances, things were not now so prosperous. It has been customary to speak of the period as a period of decline for the Baptists. But the history of this period needs to be re-written. There were quite a lot of larger and smaller gatherings here and there that knew much of the Lord's blessing.

The name of **Dr. John Gill** (1697-1771) figures largely at this time. Without doubt he was the greatest Baptist theologian, and his commentary on the whole Bible was a remarkable work and had enormous influence.

Among the well-known Particular Baptist ministers of this period, some of the best-remembered names are men like **Benjamin Beddome** of Bourton-on-the-Water; **Samuel Medley** of Liverpool; **John Fawcett** of Hebden Bridge. No doubt the reason why these names are best remembered is that they were hymnwriters whose hymns are still sung today.

Another eminent Particular Baptist hymnwriter from this period was **Anne Steele**.

Towards the end of the 1700s, the leading minister in London was **Abraham Booth**, author of the treatise *The Reign of Grace*.

But changes were taking place, emphasised especially by the publication in 1785 of a book entitled *The Gospel Worthy of All Acceptation*.

## CHANGES

Throughout the 1700s there was in England just one Particular Baptist denomination. Though there were differences – for instance, the terms of communion – substantially the denomination remained one.

But towards the end of the century changes were taking place. It appears that some were becoming more general in doctrine, whilst others, who retained their Calvinism, were becoming legalistic, while some of the preaching became dry and arid. Just before his death, Benjamin Beddome had written:

“We sadly fear that a spirit of error is creeping into some of the churches, and that where the great doctrines of the gospel are not totally rejected, their importance is not properly attended to.”

All this was accentuated by the publication of a work entitled *The Gospel Worthy of All Acceptation*, written by the Northamptonshire minister **Andrew Fuller** (1754-1815). Fuller contended for a more general view of the atonement, limiting its efficacy only by the Father’s choice and the Holy Spirit’s application. He strongly contended that it was the duty of all men savingly to repent and believe, and that a universal offer should be made. This was contrary to what the Particular Baptist position had been in the past.

Soon afterwards a number of ministers appeared who rejected the Fuller position, contending that the invitations of the gospel were to those sinners who had been brought to feel their need and that Christ cannot be offered.

The foremost of these preachers were William Gadsby (1773-1844), John Warburton (1776-1857) and John Kershaw (1792-1870).

**William Gadsby** was a stocking weaver who came from a poor family in Warwickshire. Led very clearly into the truth, for most of his life he was minister at the Particular Baptist chapel in Manchester, one of the largest industrial cities in England. Here he gathered a large congregation, and his preaching was abundantly blessed throughout the country. He also became extremely well known through his appearance on the social and political scene, using his fame and ability to defend the suffering and underprivileged. William Gadsby produced a selection of hymns in 1814, many written by himself – the best known being, “Immortal honours rest on Jesus’ head.”



**John Warburton** and **John Kershaw** were poor Lancashire handloom weavers, both baptized by William Gadsby. Under the blessing of the Lord both were favoured with much prosperity in their pastorates – John Kershaw in his native Rochdale, and John Warburton at Trowbridge in Wiltshire. (For over forty years, Warburton’s congregation numbered in the region of 1000.) Each of these two godly men left interesting autobiographies.

A separation was becoming more and more inevitable. Throughout England there were many hungry, longing souls who were not profiting under the new style of preaching. These lovingly welcomed such men as Gadsby, Warburton and Kershaw, and rejoiced in the glorious gospel of the grace of God which they preached.

One of the oldest Baptists in Lancashire, when he heard William Gadsby preach for the first time, said, “I was never so blessed in my soul under any minister before. He does not preach a new gospel. It is the old gospel, brought forward in a way so blessedly calculated to meet the cases of the Lord’s tried family.”

This simple statement beautifully summarises the change that was now taking place in the Particular Baptist churches.

## THE GOSPEL STANDARD MAGAZINE: 1835

On August 1st, 1835, a new magazine appeared for the first time from an obscure printing works in Manchester. The name given to it was the *Gospel Standard*.

The idea was that of William Gadsby's son, John, an energetic young printer, at the time enjoying the sweet liberty of the gospel. His father promised to help and take charge. The magazine cost twopence and consisted of twenty-four pages. Five hundred were printed – but the Manchester congregation took the lot. So another five hundred were printed, which quickly went. Then the London chapels heard of it, so another thousand were printed, which also quickly were sold.

175 years have now passed and the *Gospel Standard* has appeared without fail each month. It is now the oldest religious monthly magazine in England.

The *Gospel Standard* was essentially a spiritual magazine, and contended strongly for the truths which William Gadsby loved and preached. But there was a readership waiting; the ground had been prepared. There was a people hungering and thirsting for the truths appearing in the new magazine. The text at the beginning of each issue summarised it all: “Blessed are they that do hunger and thirst after righteousness, for they shall be filled.”

Obviously there was much opposition from those who did not like this kind of religion, but as John Gadsby later wrote, “God was on our side, and it was in vain that they tried to swallow us up.”

Sales rapidly increased so that after a time 17,500 copies a month were being sold.

The *Gospel Standard* was wonderfully favoured when a young clergyman, who had just seceded from the Church of England, became Editor. He was **Joseph Charles Philpot** (1802-1869) who possessed a brilliant mind as well as much grace; he had been Fellow of Worcester College, Oxford. From 1836 till his death in 1869 he contributed very gracious and able articles. Even today he is well known and highly esteemed among the Dutch churches, both in Holland and in North America as well as in his native England.

The outer covers of the magazine contained details of chapel services and names of the ministers who were preaching. Thus, without there being any formal organisation, chapels and ministers began to be loosely gathered around the *Gospel Standard*. Some ministers began to be known as “Standard men,” and it was generally realised what this signified.

## CONTROVERSY AND SEPARATION

In the 1860s the congregations connected with the *Gospel Standard* magazine, though still independent, became much more closely linked together as a separate and distinct body.

For some time there had been Strict Baptist ministers who firmly held the doctrines of grace but who began to cast doubt on the eternal Sonship of Christ in His divine nature. They still believed that He is true almighty God but contended that He was a Son by office – that His name as “the Son of God” referred to the office He undertook in the covenant of grace.

In 1860 one of these ministers, William Crowther, preached a sermon in Hitchin contending for this. This was published under the title of “The Things Most Surely Believed Amongst us.” J.C. Philpot immediately saw the danger: that this affected the whole sacred doctrine of the Trinity. If Christ was not *always* the Son, then the Father was not *always* the Father. Very ably did he answer William Crowther’s sermon in the pages of the *Gospel Standard*. And, of course, the Gospel Standard view is the orthodox view that has always been firmly maintained by the church of God, and in the great confessions of the Christian church.

Those who believed the orthodox view united around the *Gospel Standard* and separated from those who were in error. Another magazine, the *Earthen Vessel*, opened its pages to the controversy and allowed articles denying the eternal Sonship to appear. This was strange as the Editor, Charles Waters Banks, himself believed in the eternal Sonship.

So about this time people began to speak of “Gospel Standard” Strict Baptists and “Earthen Vessel” Strict Baptists.

It will be noticed that the word “Strict Baptists” now began to be used more commonly instead of “Particular Baptists” or just “Baptists” (as Gadsby and Kershaw described themselves). This was because of a legal ruling in the High Court (“the Norwich case”) which had ruled that a “Particular Baptist” did not automatically mean a strict communionist; he might be one who practises open communion.

In all this, Strict Baptists connected with the *Gospel Standard* magazine were concerned for the honour and glory of our Lord Jesus Christ.

## DAYS THAT FOLLOWED

Our churches have always been independent. There is no ruling body and no official denominational structure. However, as we have seen, there was a gathering of those churches and ministers who stood firmly together in loyalty to the truth.

As the years passed, there were a few things that strengthened this union.

The spirit of the originators of the *Gospel Standard* (especially men like William Gadsby) was very practical. Real religion should be shown in love to the brethren. This spirit continued, and there was a desire that something of a regular nature should be brought into place to help poor and needy ministers and their widows, and poor and needy Christians. So an Aid Society (for ministers) was formed in 1872, followed by a Poor Relief Society in 1878. At the end of the century, following the death of the originator, John Gadsby, The Gadsby Memorial Fund was set up to give extra help at the end of the year during the dark days of winter.

Then in 1948 the first of the Gospel Standard Bethesda Homes was opened, to care for the aged from Gospel Standard chapels in their last days.

These Societies remain with us to the present day and have been of untold benefit to the Lord's needy people.

The Annual Meetings of the Societies, held in April each year, when reports are given and the accounts passed, have proved to be a wonderful rallying point for our churches and our ministers. The Business Meeting is always preceded by a prayer meeting in the morning, and followed by a preaching service in the evening.

Only this year (2010) at the Annual Meetings, the text of the sermon was: "The Lord our God be with us, as He was with our fathers; let Him not leave us nor forsake us."

## WHAT WE BELIEVE

The most important question of all is: what do we really stand for? A simple answer would be the glorious doctrines of the gospel of God's free grace and the vital necessity of the Holy Spirit's work so that as sinners we have a personal, saving knowledge of Christ.

However, we feel sure that some will have heard things about us, and others will more closely enquire in what way we really differ from others who hold to the doctrines of free and sovereign grace, commonly called Calvinism.

1. We do not believe in the free offer of the gospel. We believe that the gospel must be preached to all, that sinners must be warned of their lost estate by sin and pointed to the Saviour. They must experience the new birth as a gracious preparation for heaven.

But we cannot find any "offers" in Scripture, and believe that "offering" the Saviour is dishonouring to His name. We believe the invitations of the gospel are to those who feel their need, and that,

"The vilest sinner out of hell,  
Who lives to feel his need,  
Is welcome to the throne of grace,  
The Saviour's blood to plead."

2. We believe that the believer's rule of life is the gospel, not the law of works given to Moses. Some have completely misunderstood this and called it "antinomianism," but our belief is that the gospel contains all that is included in the law, but is a much higher standard. This is how the Lord Jesus spoke of such things as adultery reaching to the thoughts of the heart.

When the believer is tempted, he does not look to the law but to Christ, who not only sets the example but gives the grace to obey.

In practical terms, though we do not believe the law is the rule, yet no body of people in England keeps the Sabbath day more strictly than we do. To walk worthy of our high calling is a vital point in our most holy faith.

Flowing from our beliefs, our people have always contended for a gracious separation from worldliness – in every aspect of life.

The standard in our churches must always be: "That in all things He (the Lord Jesus) might have the pre-eminence."

## OUR SERVICES

If a visitor were to attend one of our services for the first time, what should he expect?

The usual order of our services is as follows (though, of course, there are variations from place to place):

Hymn  
Reading from the Word of God  
Prayer  
Hymn  
Sermon  
Hymn  
Benediction

No doubt the visitor would be struck with the quietness and seriousness with which the congregation gathers for worship (no noise or talking before the service). There is reverence throughout.

The hymnbook used is William Gadsby's Selection, first published in 1814, but with three supplements added over the years, making 1156 hymns in all. As well as hymns by Gadsby himself, there are the hymns of the well-known authors, such as Isaac Watts and Charles Wesley, and hymns by Newton, Cowper, Medley, Fawcett, Beddome, Hart, Anne Steele, Kent, and various others. Most chapels nowadays have an organ, but a few still sing unaccompanied.

The only version of the Bible used is the 1611 Authorised (King James) Version.

The whole service usually lasts about an hour and a half.

Many chapels have a Sunday school where the children are taught from the Word of God.

During the week a prayer meeting is held and sometimes another preaching service. At the prayer meeting men only take part, and pray publicly when asked by the minister or deacon presiding.

All this, of course, is but a bare "skeleton" of what takes place. The vital thing is that we pray for the Lord's gracious presence, seeking to worship Him "in Spirit and in truth," and to hear "the glorious gospel's sacred sound."

## OUR CHAPELS TODAY

There are over a hundred churches connected with the *Gospel Standard* scattered about England. Some, such as Manchester and Liverpool (now Birkenhead) were founded in the 1700s. One, Southill in Bedfordshire, began in 1693.

Some of our churches are blessed with pastors, while many are visited week by week by “supply ministers.”

There are two of our chapels in Australia, tracing their roots to the original settlers from England in the 1800s.

In the U.S.A. are three chapels and two in Canada. The one in Grand Rapids, Michigan, has sprung from a group of Dutch Baptists who emigrated to America in the late 1800s, and later came into contact with an English minister who had moved to preach in the U.S.A. The others have come from Dutch churches that hold the doctrines of grace but practise infant sprinkling. The separation has taken place by those who have become convinced that believers’ baptism is scriptural.

It is our desire to love all who love the Lord and Saviour Jesus Christ in sincerity and truth. Thus we have close connections with undenominational Societies, like the Trinitarian Bible Society who translate, publish and circulate uncorrupted versions of the Word of God.



## CONCLUSION

We hope that we have simply and honestly answered the question: who are we? Of course, we are all sinners, still in a body of sin and death, and there are faults among us. Yet we do believe that we love the gospel, especially as it sets forth the glorious Person and Work of our Lord and Saviour Jesus Christ.

Probably the favourite hymn sung among us is one written by William Gadsby himself:

“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.”

## **FURTHER READING**

S.F. Paul: Historical Sketch of the Gospel Standard Baptists.

B.A. Ramsbottom: History of the Gospel Standard Magazine

B.A. Ramsbottom: William Gadsby

B.A. Ramsbottom: Stranger than Fiction (William Kiffin)

John Kershaw: The Autobiography of an Eminent Lancashire Preacher

John Warburton: Mercies of a Covenant God

J.R. Broome: John Warburton, Servant of a Covenant God

J.H. Gosden: What Gospel Standard Baptists Believe

Articles of Faith

## **FURTHER INFORMATION**

Secretary, Gospel Standard Societies: Mr. D.J. Christian, 5 Roundwood Gardens, Harpenden, Hertfordshire, AL5 3AJ, England. (Telephone: 01582 762717)

Gospel Standard Library, 5 Hove Park Gardens, Hove, East Sussex, BN3 6HN. (Telephone: 01273 559813)

Gospel Standard Trust Publications, 12(b) Roundwood Lane, Harpenden, Hertfordshire, AL5 3BZ, England. (Telephone: 01582 765448)

