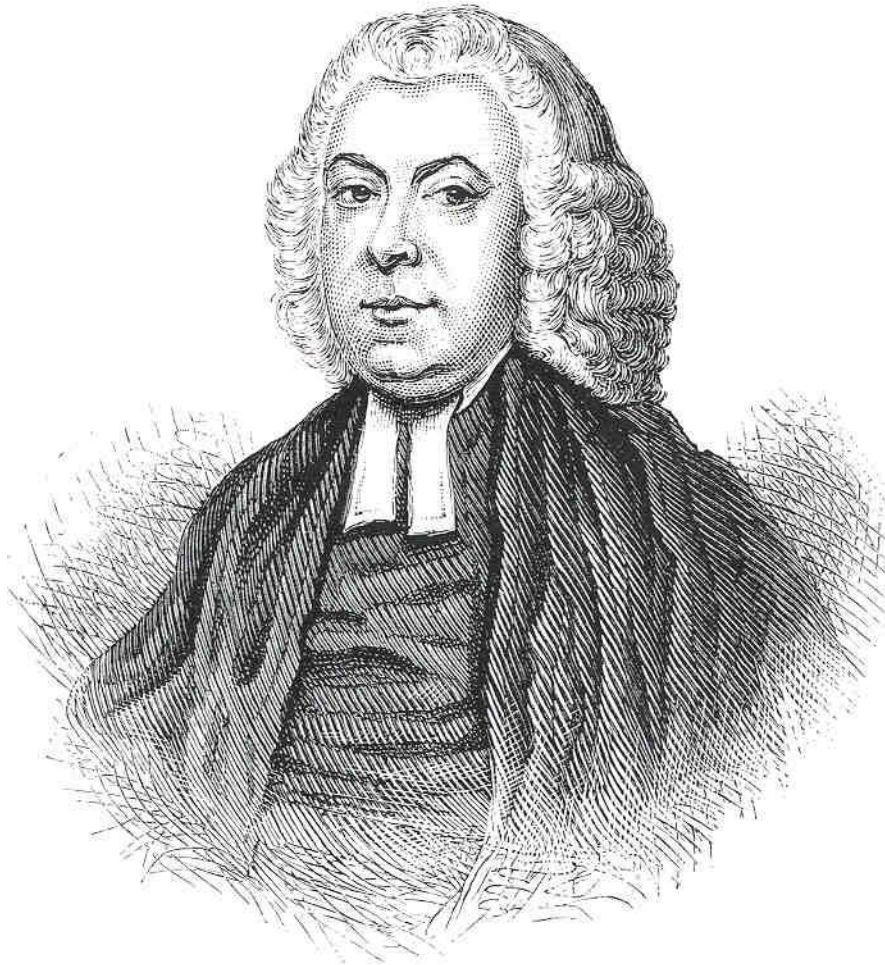


“FOR ME TO LIVE IS CHRIST AND DIE IS GAIN”:
A TERCENTENNIAL APPRECIATION OF THE LIFE &
MINISTRY OF WILLIAM GRIMSHAW (1708-1763)



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Early days in Lancashire and Cambridge

William Grimshaw was born on September 3, 1708, at Brindle, Lancashire, not far from Preston. There is very little reliable data about his early years, though there is some evidence that his parents, nominal Christians at the time, raised him with a sense of moral responsibility to a holy God.¹ At the age of seventeen, Grimshaw went up to Cambridge, where he was admitted to Christ’s College—the college of John Milton (1608-1674)—as a sizar (poor student) in April, 1726. The population of Cambridge at the town was some six thousand, a fraction of today’s population. Academic standards at Cambridge during the eighteenth century were not that high. The majority of the professors did not lecture or tutor the students, spending their time writing, and leaving the direction of the students’ academic studies to tutors or tutorial assistants. Academic requirements for completing a degree course were minimal. As John Wesley noted about the moral state of Cambridge University and its counterpart in Oxford: “the moment a young man sets foot in either Oxford or Cambridge he is surrounded by company of all kinds...with loungers and triflers of every sort; with men who no more concern themselves with learning than religion.”²

During his first couple of years at Cambridge, Grimshaw, however, applied himself to his studies and later described himself at this time as “sober and diligent.”³ But this soon changed as Grimshaw gave way to the moral turpitude of university life. In his own words, he fell in “with bad company” and “learned to drink, swear, and what not.”⁴ Given his style of living, it is amazing that he was hoped to become a clergyman upon graduation. As he put it, he aimed at such because it would give him a steady source of income, a roof over his head and bread upon his plate.⁵

What theology he had was of the Deistic variety, in which the robust Christianity of the Reformers and Puritans was subjected to the scrutiny of human reason and all that seemingly could not pass the test of rationality was rejected or played down. So it was the very concept of revelation was

¹ Frank Baker, *William Grimshaw 1708-1763* (London: The Epworth Press, 1963), 16-17.

² Cited J. H. Whiteley, *Wesley’s England* (London: Epworth Press, 1945), 269.

³ Baker, *William Grimshaw*, 23.

⁴ Cited Baker, *William Grimshaw*, 24.

⁵ Cited Baker, *William Grimshaw*, 24.

discarded along with Trinitarianism as well as the deity of Christ.⁶ Despite his evident lack of qualifications to be a minister in the Church of England, Grimshaw was ordained in April of 1731 and proceeded to his first charge, what was then the hamlet of Littleborough, three miles north of Rochdale, Lancashire. He was in this parish only a few months. That September he moved six miles further north to Todmorden, where he was ordained a priest in the Anglican Church a year later in 1732.

Awakened to “the pardoning love of God”

It was here at Todmorden that Grimshaw began to awaken to the fact that he was in a desperate spiritual state. The godlessness of his spiritual state was all too typical of eighteenth-century clerics. Like many others throughout the length and breadth of England, Grimshaw spent his time fishing and hunting, drinking, playing cards, and swearing. And like other ministers of this ilk, he thought nothing of the vows he had made when ordained to preach the gospel and to be the spiritual guide of those in the parish. John Newton (1725-1807), who wrote an early, and classic, biography of Grimshaw, noted that he did “his duty, as the phrase is, in the church, once on the Lord’s day. ...With this his conscience was satisfied. Whether his flock was satisfied, he neither knew nor cared.”⁷

How then was he changed?

In part, the cause of his awakening was the death of a five-week-old girl, the first child of a young couple in the parish, James and Susan Scholfield. The mother awoke one awful morning to find the child she dearly loved stone dead. For a period of time Susan’s mind became unhinged and she continued to tend to the child as if it were alive. Grimshaw was called for, but could only advise the parents “to put away all gloomy thoughts, and to get into merry company, and divert themselves, and all would soon be right.”⁸ Not surprisingly, this advice proved utterly ineffective to help the parents overcome their grief. Grimshaw was again sent for and this time admitted he did not know what to say to help them.

⁶ Faith Cook, *William Grimshaw of Haworth* (Edinburgh/Carlisle, Pennsylvania: Banner of Truth Trust, 1997), 12-13.

⁷ *Memoirs of the Life of the Late Rev. William Grimshaw, A.B.* (London: T. Hamilton, 1814), 8.

⁸ Baker, *William Grimshaw*, 29-30.

Yet, his realization of his lack of spirituality was a first step on the road to change. He now tried to reform his life and began to urge his congregation to lead moral lives. He started praying four times a day, a practice he would continue after his conversion. But as he later admitted, all of this was but an earnest “working out a righteousness of his own,” in which he tried to balance the sins of his life with good deeds.⁹ He went on like this for seven years, from 1734 to 1741. Sometimes, though, the futility of trying to find salvation through the pathway of good works would overwhelm him and he would cry out in the middle of a service: “My friends, we are in a damnable state, and I scarcely know how we are to get out of it.”¹⁰ He was beginning to realize, in the words of Frank Baker, that “he could not put himself right with God by a multitude of devotional exercises, however arduous.”¹¹

During this period of time, in 1735, Grimshaw was married to a widow named Sarah Sutcliffe (1710-1739), whom he loved dearly, but who, after bearing him two children, died at the very young age of twenty-nine.¹² Grimshaw was shattered. He went through months of deep depression—not only mourning for his wife but also sorrowing over his sinful state. He was harassed with sexual temptations, which he resisted, but left him deeply troubled. Old Deistic notions reappeared. On one occasion, for example, he “was tempted to believe Christ to be but a meer man.” On another that the God of the Bible was “a cruel implacable Being.”¹³

But in the midst of his despair God sent him deliverance through “the agency of a man and a book.”¹⁴ The man was probably the Yorkshire evangelist, Benjamin Ingham (1712-1772) a friend of John Wesley and the brother-in-law of Selina Hastings, though Grimshaw does not specifically identify him. Ingham had been ordained in 1735 and accompanied John and Charles Wesley as a missionary to the American colony of Georgia. In 1737, after his return to Ossett in Yorkshire, his native town, and upon an evangelical conversion, Ingham started to establish the Inghamite Methodists after being banned in 1739 from preaching in Anglican churches. By 1755

⁹ Baker, *William Grimshaw*, 37.

¹⁰ Cited Cook, *William Grimshaw*, 20.

¹¹ Cited Baker, *William Grimshaw*, 39.

¹² Baker, *William Grimshaw*, 34-39; Cook, *William Grimshaw*, 20-22.

¹³ Baker, *William Grimshaw*, 41.

¹⁴ Baker, *William Grimshaw*, 44.

there were over eighty Inghamite congregations, mainly in Yorkshire and Lancashire. Whether Ingham or not, this minister used to ride over to see Grimshaw and rebuke him for his attempts to earn salvation, “Mr. Grimshaw, you are a Jew, you are no believer in Jesus Christ, you are building on the sand.”¹⁵

The book was entitled *The Doctrine of Justification by Faith* by the Puritan divine John Owen (1616-1683). Visiting a friend in 1741, Grimshaw happened to see the book lying on a table. Seeing from the title on the spine that it was a theological work, he picked it up and turned to the title page. Then, a strange event happened: as he opened the book he felt “an uncommon heat” flush his face. Thinking that the flash of heat must have come from a fire in the fireplace of the room, he turned towards it but realized that it was too far away to have caused the flash of heat. He opened the book again and experienced a second flash of heat. He took these flashes of heat to be signs that this book would be of special help to him.¹⁶ And so it proved.

Owen’s teaching in this volume on the imputed righteousness of Christ was of especial help. Owen argued that justification meant that the sinner who was justified no longer sought to commend himself to God through his own good deeds, but rested in the fact that the righteousness of Christ was reckoned to him, giving him a spotless holiness purer than an angel’s. Reading this work, Grimshaw was enabled, as he later put it, to “renounce myself, every degree of fancied merit and ability, and to embrace Christ only for my all in all. O what light and comfort did I now enjoy in my own soul, and what a taste of the pardoning love of God!”¹⁷

The Haworth Revival

His preaching now began to change as he heralded forth the good news of salvation by faith alone. Within a year of his conversion, Grimshaw moved to a new parish, that of Haworth in West Yorkshire. Haworth was an isolated town in a very hilly and bleak part of Yorkshire. Life here was rough and hard, with life expectancy standing around twenty-five. Almost half of all the children in the town would die before the age of six. Raw sewage would flow down the main street and contaminate the drinking water, and not surprisingly dysentery and typhus were rampant in the

¹⁵ Cited Baker, *William Grimshaw*, 44.

¹⁶ Cook, *William Grimshaw*, 26-27.

¹⁷ Cited Baker, *William Grimshaw*, 46.

town, along with that killer of the eighteenth century, smallpox.¹⁸ People sought refuge in drink, gambling and violence. The inhabitants were “very ignorant, brutish, and wicked” when Grimshaw first came to the town. They “had little more sense of religion than their cattle,” Grimshaw’s biographer, John Newton, affirmed “and were wild and uneducated like the mountains and rocks which surrounded them.”¹⁹

But this soon changed. heralding these changes was the installation of a new pulpit in the parish church, St. Michael and All Angels. As if to illustrate the new message that would be preached in this church, Grimshaw had a new pulpit installed in the church. On the sounding board above the pulpit can still be read two verses of Scripture he had engraved on it: “I am determined to know nothing among you, save Jesus Christ and him crucified” (1 Corinthians 2:2) and the verse that was to be the keystone of his subsequent ministry in Haworth “For to me to live is Christ, and to die is gain” (Philippians 1:21).²⁰

The preaching that Grimshaw’s parishioners now heard reflected these biblical sentiments. Grimshaw was an extremely gifted preacher who could hold the attention of a congregation for two hours while he preached.²¹ The conversion of the future Baptist leader William Crabtree, for instance, came through a single sentence: “One sin is enough to damn you to hell.” During the course of the sermon he would use colloquial language to appeal to his hearers’ consciences, he would denounce their sin, warn of the dreadful consequences of continuing in it, and urge all and sundry to accept Christ as their only hope of salvation. None of Grimshaw’s sermons survive, but a section of his unpublished treatise “The Admonition of a Sinner” gives one a taste of his preaching style:

My neighbour, my friend, my heart longs over you. Your manner of life is actually, openly and evidently such that if not seasonably prevented, it will shortly and certainly terminate in your inevitable, intolerable, eternal ruin and destruction. ...Don’t be angry with me, please don’t. It’s because I love you that I thus address you... I want you without delay to repent of your sins, “to seek the Lord while he may be found, to call upon him while he is near”

¹⁸ Faith Cook, “William Grimshaw—Man of faith and action” (Unpublished paper presented to The Carey Conference, Swanwick, Derbyshire, January 9, 2008), p.2.

¹⁹ Newton, *Memoirs*, 13-14, 43-44.

²⁰ Cook, *William Grimshaw*, 58.

²¹ Cook, *William Grimshaw*, 91; Baker, *William Grimshaw*, 128.

(Isaiah 55:6-7). Acquaint yourself with him, be at peace with him, through his blood, that thereby good may come to you: pardon, peace, grace, heaven, glory, glory for evermore.²²

The church began to fill with people and conversions become increasingly common. When he had first come to the church in 1742, he had had a dozen or so people taking communion in a church that could seat 1200. Five years later, by 1747, the church would be full and 1200 would take communion.²³ By the late 1740s and early 1750s, summer congregations might reach as high as 6,000! When George Whitefield (1714-1770) preached at the church in September 1749, over a thousand took communion and six thousand gathered to hear him preach.²⁴

These people came from all around the countryside. They were reached by Grimshaw himself travelling through the week to various nearby towns and villages, outside of the boundaries of his own parish, as well as through the preaching of various lay preachers whom he began to employ from 1744-45 onwards.²⁵ In any given month of 1751, for instance, Grimshaw reckoned that he might preach some sixty times.²⁶ From the point of view of Anglicanism, this was highly irregular and a source of worry to neighbouring parish ministers. To prevent Grimshaw acting irregularly, some of them had recourse to aiding and abetting violent persecution. George White (d.1751), the nearby vicar of Colne, actually raised an army of local ruffians “for the defence of the Church of England.”²⁷

Consider the following example of Thomas Lee (1727-1786):

In the year 1752, and during the winter following, the work of God prospered exceedingly; but persecution raged on every side. ...One day, as I was going through Pateley [Bridge], the captain of the mob [there], who was kept in constant pay, pursued me, and pulled me off my horse. The mob then soon collected about me; and ...dragged me into a house by the hair of the head; then pushed me back, with one or two upon me, and threw me with the

²² “The Admonition of a Sinner” (Unpublished manuscript held in the John Rylands University Library of Manchester). Cited Esther Bennett, *Heavenly Fire: The life and ministry of William Grimshaw of Haworth (1708-1763)* (Dundas, Ontario: Joshua Press, 2000), 8.

²³ Cook, *William Grimshaw*, 66.

²⁴ Baker, *William Grimshaw*, 182.

²⁵ Cook, *William Grimshaw*, 85.

²⁶ Cook, “William Grimshaw—Man of faith and action”, p.4.

²⁷ Cook, *William Grimshaw*, 127. On the persecution, see Baker, *William Grimshaw*, 130-138.

small of my back upon the edge of the stone stairs. This nearly broke my back; and it was not well for many years after. Thence they dragged me to the common sewer, which carries the dirt of the town to the river. They rolled me in it for some time; then dragged me to the bridge and threw me into the water. They had me mostly on the ground, my strength being quite spent.

My wife, with some friends, now came up. Seeing her busy about me, some asked: “What, are you a Methodist?”—gave her several blows which made her bleed at the mouth, and swore they would put her into the river. All this time I lay upon the ground, the mob being undetermined what to do. Some cried out: “Make an end of him”—others were for sparing my life; but the dispute was cut short by their agreeing to put some others into the water. So they took them away, leaving me and my wife together. She endeavoured to raise me up; but, having no strength, I dropped to the ground again, and supported me about a hundred yards; then I was set on horseback, and made a shift to ride softly as far as Michael Granger’s house. Here I was stripped from head to foot, and was washed. I left my wet clothes here, and rode to Greenhow Hill, where many were waiting for me; and though much bruised and very weak, preached a short sermon from Psalm xxxiv.19: “Many are the troubles of the righteous; but the Lord delivereth him out of them all.”²⁸

“Mad Grimshaw”

Stories about him were legion:

- “On one occasion Grimshaw was striding along to conduct a service in a distant village and was joined by a couple of rough-looking men who saw in him one like themselves. Certainly this stocky, rugged-faced man was far removed from the conventional image of an evangelical preacher. They told him, ‘We are going to hear Mad Grimshaw. We shall have some rare sport tonight!’ Grimshaw was persuaded to accompany them. His identity was not revealed until he appeared in the pulpit. His travelling companions were silenced,

²⁸ In Bennett, *Heavenly Fire*, 13.

first by fear, then by shame, and lastly by the conviction of their own sinfulness, as he rallied them with the words: “Come on! We shall have some rare sport tonight!”²⁹

- Followed an adulterer to the home where he was having an affair with another man’s wife. Man saw him coming and hid up the chimney. Grimshaw figured out where he was—poked his head up the chimney and yelled “Boo”—terrified the man who thought the devil was after him.

- Would have the congregation sing Psalm 119 while he went out and checked the inn in the town to see if there were any drinking there. Once sent two of the churchwardens to check. They were slow in returning, so Grimshaw went in search of them. The psalm was long over when footsteps were heard and the two churchwardens appeared shamefaced with Grimshaw behind them. As Grimshaw came into the church, he cried out, “What think you! The churchwardens who went out to detect others and prevent them from sinning I have found in the inn drinking a pint of ale! For shame! For shame! For shame!”³⁰

- Horse races held at a fair in October around October 14. It was, in Grimshaw’s words, “a scene of the grossest and most vulgar riot, profligacy, and confusion.” Grimshaw sought in vain to end the races, but failed until in 1759 he made it a matter of extended prayer. That year, quite contrary to the usual pattern of weather for October, it rained incessantly for five days, from October 12 to the October 17. John Newton said that it was reported “old Grimshaw put a stop to the races by his prayers.”³¹

²⁹ Baker, *William Grimshaw*, 13.

³⁰ Baker, *William Grimshaw*, 212.

³¹ Newton, *Memoirs*, 103-104. See also Baker, *William Grimshaw*, 213-214.

Impact of Grimshaw's ministry

- The key Methodist leader in the North of England
- Revived Dissent, especially Baptists, in that part of England—“Dissent warmed its hands at Grimshaw’s fire”³²—William Crabtree, James Hartley, and Richard Smith—even more significantly, John Fawcett, Sr. (1740-1817), who mentored John Sucliff (1752-1814).
- Inspired other Evangelical leaders: John Newton—Thomas Haweis spoke of Grimshaw as “that great apostle of the north”—John Fletcher—William Romaine—Henry Venn.
- Grimshaw’s teapot: “For me to live is Christ and to die is gain.”

³² Baker, *William Grimshaw*, 270.