

# “The Plain Testimony of Scripture”

How the Early English Baptists Employed the Regulative Principle to Argue for Believer’s Baptism


Steve Weaver

In 1544, in a treatise presented to the Imperial Diet at Speyer, the Genevan Reformer John Calvin articulated what has come to be known as the Regulative Principle of Worship.<sup>1</sup> In his tract on *The Necessity of Reforming the Church*, Calvin wrote that “God disapproves of all modes of worship not expressly sanctioned by His Word.”<sup>2</sup> Later in the same essay, Calvin drew the appropriate conclusion that “it ought to be sufficient for the rejection of any mode of worship, that it is not sanctioned by the command of God.”<sup>3</sup> By this standard, Calvin and the other Reformers rejected much of the accretions in the worship and practice of the Roman Catholic Church from the medieval period. But whatever forms of “fictitious worship” Calvin had in mind when he penned those words, it apparently did not include infant baptism, which was retained in the Reformed church of Geneva. Likewise in 1648, when the Puritan Jeremiah Burroughs (1599-1646) offered the definitive treatment of the Regulative Principle in his volume titled *Gospel Worship*,<sup>4</sup> the practice of believer’s baptism by immersion seems to have been the farthest thing from his mind. The English Baptist historian Thomas Crosby, however, used this paedobaptist’s own words to argue for just that in his Preface to the first volume of his *The History of the English*

Baptists.<sup>5</sup> In so doing, Crosby, who was himself the son-in-law of the prominent seventeenth-century Particular Baptist pastor Benjamin Keach, was merely following the pattern of seventeenth-century Baptists in arguing for believer’s baptism by immersion.

The early English Baptists argued for believer’s baptism by immersion based upon what John Spilsbury (1593-c. 1662/1668)<sup>6</sup> would call “the plain testimony of Scripture.”<sup>7</sup> Spilsbury would therefore reject infant baptism, since “there is neither command, or Example in all the New Testament for such practise.”<sup>8</sup> Similarly, Hercules Collins (1646/7-1702)<sup>9</sup> rejected infant baptism because, as he said, “We have neither precept nor example for that practice in all the Book of God.”<sup>10</sup> Likewise John Norcott (1621-1676)<sup>11</sup> would argue that sprinkling could not serve as a substitute for dipping, because “God is a jealous God, and stands upon small things in matters of Worship; ‘tis likely Nadab and Abihu thought, if they put fire in the Censer, it might serve, though it were not fire from the Altar; but God calls it strange fire, and therefore he burns them with strange fire, Leviticus 10:2-3.”<sup>12</sup> Given their understanding of the meaning of the word *baptizo*, they sought to apply the Regulative Principle more thoroughly than had Calvin or Burroughs and the





Reformed/Puritan tradition which they represented.

Since these English Baptists were convinced that the Greek word *baptizo* meant “to dip, wash, or to plunge one into the water,”<sup>13</sup> then the mode of baptism was essential. Therefore the First London Confession of Faith (1644) defined “the way and manner” of baptism as “dipping or plunging the whole body under water.”<sup>14</sup> To introduce another mode would be to disobey the clear command of Scripture since Christ had commanded that those who are taught are to be baptized and that those who believe are to be baptized. This argument was based upon the order in the Great Commission texts of Matthew 28:19 and Mark 16:16 respectively. Of the former text, Norcott’s interpretation was simply “when you have taught them, then baptize them.”<sup>15</sup> Of the latter text, Collins reasoned similarly: “Here is first Faith, then Baptism.”<sup>16</sup> Once again, these men argued from the plain sense of Scripture because they believed that God had the authority to order His worship.

Another type of biblical text used by the early Baptists in their defense of believer’s baptism was the example of baptisms performed in the New Testament. These examples supplemented their understanding of the definition of *baptizo*. They include both the baptism of Jesus by John the Baptist and the numerous examples of baptisms of new believers in the book of Acts. John Norcott begins his treatise on baptism in the very first chapter with an account of the baptism of Christ in the river of Jordan. Norcott uses the baptism of Jesus to demonstrate that baptism is dipping. The fact that Matthew 3:4 says that Jesus came “up out of the water” proved that Jesus was immersed beneath the water. Else, “had he not been down, ‘twould not have bin

said he went up.”<sup>17</sup> “We never say,” Norcott continued, “one goes out of the house when he never was in. So Christ could not be said to come out of the water, had he not been in.”<sup>18</sup> Likewise, Hercules Collins cites John 3:23 which states, “John the Baptist baptized in Enon, because there was much water there.” Collins responded to this verse by quipping, “if Sprinkling would have done, there had been no need of much Water nor Rivers.”<sup>19</sup> Given these convictions, it should not be thought unusual that the Second London Confession of Faith (1689), of which Collins was a principal signer, stated so bluntly regarding baptism that: “Immersion, or dipping of the person in water, is necessary to the due administration of this ordinance.”<sup>20</sup>

“We look upon it as our duty in our generation to be searching out the mind of God in His holy oracle.”

Hercules Collins

Collins’ commitment to the Regulative Principle is perhaps most clearly seen in the Preface to his catechism where, in the midst of an appeal for Christian unity based on a common commitment to the “fundamental principles and articles of the Christian faith,” he explains his “differing in some things about Church-constitution.” He expresses his hope that his zeal for “the true form of God’s house” will not be misunderstood. So he explains:

That God whom we serve is very jealous of his worship; and forasmuch as by his providence the law of his house hath been preserved and continued to us, we look upon it as our duty in our generation to be searching out the

mind of God in his holy oracle, as Ezra and Nehemiah did the Feast of Tabernacles, and to reform what is amiss; As Hezekiah, who took a great deal of pains to cleanse the House of God, and set all things in order, that were out of order, particularly caused the people to keep the Passover according to the Institution: for it had not, saith the text, been of a long time kept in such sort as it was written; and albeit the pure institutions of Christ were not for some hundreds of years practiced according to the due order, or very little, through the innovations of antichrist; and as circumcision for about forty years was unpracticed in the wilderness, yet as Joshua puts this duty in practice as soon as God signified his mind in that particular, so we having our judgments informed about the true way of worship, do not dare to stifle the light God hath given us.<sup>21</sup>

Though baptism may have been largely lost for centuries, it was recovered as a direct result of the renewed emphasis on the authority and sufficiency of the Word of God in the Protestant Reformation. Collins' zeal for worship regulated by God's Word drove him to reject the human innovation of infant baptism. In so doing, he was never more true to the spirit of Protestantism.

For seventeenth-century Baptists, both the mode and the recipients of baptism were vitally important. Their defense of the practice of believer's baptism by immersion was driven by their commitment to the Regulative Principle of Worship. Infant baptism simply could not be found in Scripture, and therefore must be rejected at any cost. Believer's baptism by immersion, however, was "the plain testimony of Scripture" and was therefore to be defended at any cost. GW

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1 For the historical context of Calvin's writing of the tract, see Bruce Gordon, *Calvin* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 2009), 163-164.

2 John Calvin, "The Necessity of Reforming the Church," in *Tracts Related to the Reformation*, Vol. 1. Translated by Henry Beveridge. (Edinburgh: The Calvin Translation Society, 1844), 128.

3 *Ibid.*, 133.

4 Jeremiah Burroughs, *Gospel Worship* (Morgan, PA: Soli Deo Gloria Publications, 1990).

5 Thomas Crosby, *The History of the English Baptists*, Volume 1 (London, 1738), xi-xiii.

6 John Spilsbury (sometimes Spilsbery) was the first pastor of London's oldest Baptist church. According to B.R. White, John Spilsbury was the first of the Particular Baptists to "preach and practice believer's baptism" and his *A Treatise Concerning the Lawfull Subject of Baptisme* (1643) was "the first known publication on the subject by a Calvinist." *The English Baptists of the Seventeenth Century* (London: The Baptist Historical Society, 1996), 72. For a biographical and theological sketch of Spilsbury, see James M. Renihan, "John Spilsbury (1593-c.1662/1668)," in Michael A.G. Haykin, ed., *The British Particular Baptists: 1638-1910* (Springfield, Missouri: Particular Baptist Press, 1998), 1:21-37.

7 John Spilsbery, *A Treatise Concerning the Lawfull Subject of Baptism*, 2nd edition (London: Henry Hills, 1652), unnumbered page 3 of "The Epistle to the Reader".

8 *Ibid.*

9 Hercules Collins served as the third pastor of London's oldest Baptist church. For details on the life of Hercules Collins see Michael A.G. Haykin "The Piety of Hercules Collins (1646/7-1702)" in *Devoted to the Service of the Temple: Piety, Persecution, and Ministry in the Writings of Hercules Collins*, eds. Michael A.G. Haykin and Steve Weaver (Grand Rapids: Reformation Heritage Books, 2007), 1-30.

10 Hercules Collins, *An Orthodox Catechism* (London: 1680), 26-27.

11 John Norcott was the second pastor of the Wapping congregation, having followed John Spilsbury upon his death in either 1662 or 1668.

12 John Norcott, *Baptism Discovered Plainly & Faithfully, According to the Word of God* (1672), 19.

13 Spilsbery, *A Treatise Concerning the Lawfull Subject of Baptism*, unnumbered page 3 of "The Epistle to the Reader".

14 William L. Lumpkin, *Baptist Confessions of Faith* (Valley Forge, PA: Judson Press, 1969), 6.

15 Norcott, *Baptism Discovered Plainly & Faithfully*, 10.

16 Hercules Collins, *Believers-Baptism from Heaven, and of Divine Institution. Infants-Baptism from Earth, and Human Invention* (London, 1691), 8.

17 Norcott, *Baptism Discovered Plainly and Faithfully*, 5.

18 *Ibid.*

19 Collins, *Believer's Baptism from Heaven*, 16.

20 Lumpkin, *Baptist Confessions of Faith*, 291.

21 Collins, *An Orthodox Catechism*, Preface.