

**“The Church of Christ, who upon Confession of Faith have bin Baptised”:
Hercules Collins and Baptist Ecclesiology**

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In his 1854 study of Baptist beliefs, *Baptists the Only Thorough Religious Reformers*, John Q. Adams argued that chief among the reforms sought by Baptists has been “*The Exaltation of the Word of God above Tradition, in all Matters of Religious Duty.*”¹ Thus, Adams described Baptists as the only group which has consistently applied the principles of the Protestant Reformation. This was certainly the intent of the seventeenth-century English Baptists. They not only emerged historically from the Separatist congregations which had broken away from the Church of England in an attempt to further reform their churches according to the Word of God, they also developed doctrinally within the same theological framework as these reforming churches. There was a basic agreement with the wider stream of Puritan/Separatist thinking. Flowing out of their commitment to the authority of Scripture, these Baptists developed their distinctive ecclesiology. Indeed all of the Baptist ecclesiological commitments can be shown to flow out of a Puritan/Separatist worldview. As such, this paper will argue that Hercules Collins’ Baptist ecclesiology seems to have flown naturally from his Puritan-esque commitment to the authority of Scripture.

Definition of the Church

Collins was happy to define the church using the terms used in Reformation and Puritan documents. For example, in his hypothetical dispute between a conformist and nonconformist in *Some Reasons for Separation From the Communion of the Church of England* (published in 1682) Collins admitted that he could “find but little fault” with the Reformed

¹John Q. Adams, *Baptists the Only Thorough Religious Reformers* (New York: Edward H. Fletcher, 1854), 47.

definition of the church contained in the Thirty-Nine Articles of the Church of England.² Collins had cited Article 19's definition of the church: "The visible Church of Christ is a Congregation of Faithful Men, in the which the pure Word of God is preached, and the Sacraments duly Administred according to Christs Ordinance in all those things that of necessity are requisite to the same."³ Notwithstanding his general agreement with this article, Collins would later dispute whether the practice of the Church of England actually conformed to this definition, especially regarding the Church being a "Congregation of Faithful Men" and whether they really administered the sacraments "according to Christs Institution."⁴ Collins made it clear, however, that he preferred the definition of the church put forth by the "Prince of Puritans"⁵ John Owen in his *A Brief Instruction in the Worship of God*. In this work, Owen provided instruction about the worship and discipline of the church by means of a question and answer format. Collins cited question 19 and the answer from page 77 of the 1676 edition of Owen's work.

Quest. *What is an instituted Church of the Gospel?*

Ans. *A Society of Persons called out of the World, or their natural worldly State, by the Administration of the Word and Spirit, into the Obedience of the Faith or the Knowledge of the Worship of God in Christ, joynd together in a Holy Bond, or by Special Agreement for the Exercise of the Communion of Saints in the due Observation of all the Ordinances of the Gospel.*⁶

Although, as James M. Renihan has observed, Collins would definitely have differed in his understanding of what the "due Observation of all the Ordinances of the Gospel" meant, he and Owen nevertheless shared "the same basic concept of what a church was to be."⁷ In short, the

²H[ercules] C[ollins], *Some Reasons for Separation From the Communion of the Church of England, and the Unreasonableness of Persecution Upon that Account* (London: John How, 1682), 4.

³Collins, *Some Reasons for Separation*, 4.

⁴Collins, *Some Reasons for Separation*, 4-8.

⁵So designated by biographer Andrew Thomson in his *John Owen: Prince of Puritans* (Fearn, Scotland: Christian Focus Publications, 2004).

⁶Collins, *Some Reasons for Separation*, 4. Cf. J[ohn] Owen, *A Brief Instruction in the Worship of God, and Discipline of the Churches of the New Testament, by way of Question and Answer* (London: Nath. Ponder, 1676), 77.

⁷James M. Renihan, *Edification and Beauty: The Practical Ecclesiology of the English Particular Baptists, 1675–1705*, Studies in Baptist History and Thought 17 (Milton Keynes, England: Paternoster, 2008), 43.

church was to be a company of believers, set apart from the world, united together for obedience to Christ's ordinances. Throughout *Some Reasons for Separation*, Collins labored to show that this was, in fact, the Church of England's own definition as codified in Article 19 of her confessional statement. On this basis, he argued that the National Church was inconsistent in recognizing sprinkled infants as members of the church.

Two years before Collins published his argument for separation from the Church of England, Collins' convictions about the definition of the church had been obliquely expressed when in his *An Orthodox Catechism* (published in 1680) he addressed his congregation, then meeting on Old Gravel Lane, as "the Church of Christ, who upon Confession of Faith have bin Baptised."⁸ Inherent in the definition of the church espoused by Collins was the idea of a regenerate church membership. The church was to be composed of those who have professed faith in Christ and who had then been subsequently baptized. This was the practice of the Wapping church during Collins' ministry there. The church only admitted as members those who had been baptized as believers. At a church meeting held on December 29, 1698, Susanna Beale applied to the congregation for church membership. The minutes clarified that, although her membership had been most recently with a Congregational church,⁹ she had been "formerly baptized by this congregation."¹⁰ On other occasions, when new members were received an indication was given in the minutes that the individual under consideration had been "formerly baptized by" with the name of the pastor who administered the baptism listed. Unlike the Church of England, the practice of the Wapping church was consistent with her confessional belief

⁸H[ercules] Collins, *An Orthodox Catechism: Being the Sum of Christian Religion, Contained in the Law and Gospel* (London, 1680), "The Preface;" James M. Renihan, *True Confessions: Baptist Documents in the Reformed Family* (Palmdale, CA: Reformed Baptist Academic Press, 2004), 236.

⁹The Church in Southwark then pastored by Jonathan Owen. John Waddington, "Appendix I: The Church in Southwark," in *The Works of John Robinson, Pastor of the Pilgrim Fathers* (Boston: Doctrinal Tract and Book Society, 1851), 3:452. This church was the Jacob–Lathrop–Jessey church from which the first Particular Baptist churches emerged in the 1630s and 1640s. For the most helpful chronology of these events, see Jason G. Duesing, "Counted Worthy: The Life and Thought of Henry Jessey, 1601–1663, Puritan Chaplain, Independent and Baptist Pastor, Millenarian Politician and Prophet" (Ph.D. diss., Southwestern Baptist Theological Seminary, 2008), 121-67.

¹⁰*Wapping Church Book* [manuscript], 29 December 1698.

articulated in the Second London Confession of Faith, which stated that local congregations should be made up of “visible Saints” who had professed “the Faith of the Gospel, and Obedience unto God by Christ according to it.”¹¹ In the Wapping Church, the final authority of governance rested with the congregation, which was able to overrule even the pastor with a majority opinion. This can be demonstrated with evidence from the minute book as I have done elsewhere.¹² Collins not only shared a common definition of the church with the Church of England and Congregationalists (but not Presbyterians who add “and their children” to “those throughout the world that profess the true religion”),¹³ he also shared a similar view of the Sacraments and the Lord’s Supper.

The Sacraments

In just his third year as pastor of the Wapping congregation, Hercules Collins published a revision of the Heidelberg Catechism, the aforementioned *An Orthodox Catechism*.¹⁴ Collins seems to have had at least three purposes in publishing this work. The catechism functions as a tool for pastoral instruction, as a polemic against false teaching, and as a plea for doctrinal unity. An examination of the *Orthodox Catechism* reveals that Collins has clearly modified the Heidelberg Catechism for use as a tool in fulfilling his pastoral duties. Despite these limited modifications, when comparing the two catechisms it is striking to note how very similar they are. Out of the 129 questions in the Heidelberg Catechism (the *Orthodox Catechism* is not numbered), there are only eleven substantial changes: ten questions added and one omitted. Most

¹¹A *Confession of Faith, Put forth by the Elders and Brethren Of many Congregations Of Christians (Baptized upon Profession of their Faith) In London and the Countrey*, 3rd ed. (London: S. Bridge, 1699), 85-86; William L. Lumpkin, *Baptist Confessions of Faith*, 2nd ed. (Valley Forge, PA: Judson Press, 1969), 285.

¹²See my dissertation: G. Stephen Weaver, Jr. “Hercules Collins: Orthodox, Puritan, Baptist” (Ph.D. diss., The Southern Baptist Theological Seminary, 2013).

¹³See Westminster Confession of Faith, 25.2.

¹⁴The complete text of the catechism can be found in Renihan, *True Confessions*, 236-87. Renihan does not include Collins’ “An Appendix concerning the Ordinance of Singing.” Collins, *An Orthodox Catechism*, 75-86. A revised and edited version of the catechism has recently been published. Hercules Collins, *An Orthodox Catechism*, ed. Michael A.G. Haykin and G. Stephen Weaver, Jr. (Palmdale, CA: Reformed Baptist Academic Press, 2013).

of the changes are what one might expect in a Baptist revision of a sixteenth-century Reformed document. The discussion of the mode and proper recipients of baptism constitutes the main area of divergence between the two catechisms. Collins, however, followed the Heidelberg Catechism in its treatment of the meaning of baptism. He also, perhaps more unexpectedly, retained unchanged the sections of the Heidelberg on the sacraments and the Lord's Supper. For example, the earliest edition of the first confession of the Particular Baptists, the First London Confession of 1644, does not even mention the Lord's Supper at all. The 1646 edition added the words "and after to partake of the Lord's Supper" to the end of Article XXXIX which stated: "That Baptisme is an Ordinance of the new Testament, given by Christ, to be dispensed onely upon persons professing faith, or that are Disciples, or taught, who upon a profession of faith, ought to be baptized."¹⁵ This lack of attention to the Lord's Supper was most likely, as James M. Renihan has suggested, because it was not a matter of controversy among the Particular Baptists at this time. They assumed, rather than argued for, the meaning of the Lord's Supper. They most likely assumed a similar view of the Lord's Supper as "the Independents with whom they were companions."¹⁶ Although Collins was not hesitant to alter his catechism where he believed it to be warranted by Scripture, he obviously had no problem using the word "sacrament" and retaining the definition used in the Heidelberg—language that can be traced back to authors such as Philipp Melancthon (1497–1560), John Calvin (1509–1564), and Heinrich Bullinger (1504–1575). One area that was changed was the section dealing with Baptism. Since that is the key area that distinguished the Baptists from their Congregationalist contemporaries, that will be the focus of the remainder of this paper.

¹⁵Cf. *The Confession of Faith* (1644), XXXIX; *A Confession Of Faith Of seven Congregations or Churches of Christ in London* (1646), XXXIX. See also Lumpkin, *Baptist Confessions of Faith*, 167.

¹⁶Renihan, *Edification and Beauty*, 142. For an extended treatment of seventeenth-century English Particular Baptist views of the Lord's Supper, see my essay in the forthcoming issue of the *Journal of the Institute of Reformed Baptist Studies*. G. Stephen Weaver, Jr., "Christ Spiritually Present and Believers Spiritually Nourished: The Lord's Supper in 17th English Particular Baptist Life" in *JIRBS*, 2015.

Baptism

Within fifty years of the recovery of the practice of immersing believers, Collins would respond to Thomas Wall who had falsely accused the Baptists of receiving their baptism from John Smyth. Collins vigorously denied these charges.

Could not the Ordinance of Christ, which was lost in the Apostacy, be revived, (as the Feast of Tabernacles was, tho lost a great while) unless in such a filthy way as you falsly assert, viz. that *the English Baptists received their Baptism from Mr. John Smith*? It is absolutely untrue, it being well known, by some yet alive, how false this Assertion is; and if *J.W.* will but give a meeting to any of us, and bring whom he pleaseth with him, we shall sufficiently shew the Falsity of what is affirmed by him in this Matter, and in many other things he hath unchristianly asserted.¹⁷

Collins was certainly in a position to know the origins of baptism among the Particular Baptists since he was a personal acquaintance of three important figures who were actively involved in the early 1640s when immersion was introduced in London. Not only was he a friend of William Kiffin and Hanserd Knollys, he was also at the very least an acquaintance of Richard Blunt, with whom Collins was arrested along with thirteen others in June of 1670 for assembling together unlawfully at a conventicle.¹⁸ Blunt is an enigmatic figure in Baptist history. He figures prominently in the so-called “Kiffin Manuscript,”¹⁹ which provides most of the known details about the origins of Particular Baptists in England in the 1640s, but little else is known of him. Blunt was allegedly sent to the Netherlands to inquire about the practice of immersion. He returned with letters from a teacher identified as “Io: Batte.” Upon his return, he baptized a Mr. Blackrock and then together they baptized the others.²⁰ This event in January of 1642 not only marks the beginning of Particular Baptist life in England, it also constitutes the start of the very

¹⁷Collins, *Believers-Baptism from Heaven*, 115.

¹⁸Sessions of the Peace Rolls for 27 June 1670–MJ/SR/1389.

¹⁹The text of the “Kiffin Manuscript” is transcribed in Champlin Burrage, *The Early English Dissenters in the Light of Recent Research (1550–1641)* (Cambridge: University Press, 1912), 2:302-5.

²⁰For a detailed analysis of the evidence for and against this trip, see Stephen Wright, *The Early English Baptists, 1603–1649* (Woodbridge, England: The Boydell Press, 2006), 75-110; and Jason G. Duesing, “Counted Worthy: The Life and Thought of Henry Jessey, 1601–1663, Puritan Chaplain, Independent and Baptist Pastor, Millenarian Politician and Prophet” (Ph.D. diss., Southwestern Baptist Theological Seminary, 2008), 141-51. Wright argues against the trip to the Netherlands, proposing instead that Blunt met with an Englishman named Timothy Batte. Wright, *The Early English Baptists*, 85-89. Duesing counters that while “Wright puts forth a compelling case,” his wish for “Jo” to read “Tmo,” for “Timothy” is a “greater stretch” than earlier attempts to identify “Io: Batte” with the Dutchman John Batten. Duesing, “Counted Worthy,” 146n87.

church of which Collins would become pastor in 1677. Blunt's presence with Collins at the conventicle in 1670, nearly thirty years after his historic involvement in the re-introduction of immersion in England, is significant in demonstrating the young Collins' connections with the previous generation of Baptist leaders.²¹

Collins not only had clear connections with the first generation of Particular Baptist leaders, he was also the third pastor of the body that first adopted immersion in 1642. Each of the first three pastors of the Wapping church published works on baptism. John Spilsbury (1593–c. 1662/1668)²² was the first pastor of this congregation. According to B. R. White, 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.”²³ Spilsbury was one of the original signers, and perhaps the author, of the First London Confession of Faith (1644).²⁴ Spilsbury’s work on baptism was largely apologetic, the majority of it being a response to objections made by paedobaptists who saw believer’s baptism as a novel practice. In 1652, Spilsbury published a second edition of his treatise on baptism, which was “corrected and enlarged by the Author.”²⁵ This is the edition that will be referenced for the analysis below. John Norcott (1621–1676) was the second pastor of the

²¹The following appears in a slightly altered form in G. Stephen Weaver, Jr., “The Puritan Argument for the Immersion of Believers: How Seventeenth-Century Baptists Utilized the Regulative Principle of Worship” in *Recovering a Covenantal Heritage: Essays in Baptist Covenant Theology*, ed. Richard C. Barcellos (Palmdale, CA: Reformed Baptist Academic Press, 2014),

²²For a biographical and theological sketch of Spilsbury, see James M. Renihan, “John Spilsbury (1593–c.1662/1668),” in *The British Particular Baptists: 1638–1910*, ed. Michael A. G. Haykin (Springfield, MO: Particular Baptist Press, 1998), 1:21–37; and Thomas J. Nettles, *The Baptists: Key People Involved in Forming a Baptist Identity*, vol. 1, *Beginnings in Britain* (Fearn, Scotland: Christian Focus Publications, 2005), 113–27.

²³B. R. White, *The English Baptists of the Seventeenth Century* (London: The Baptist Historical Society, 1996), 72. The General Baptist Edward Barber published on the subject in 1641. Edward Barber, *A Small Treatise of Baptisme, or, Dipping* (n.p., 1641).

²⁴James Renihan states that “several authors hypothesize” that Spilsbury was either the author or co-author of the *First London Confession*. He cites A. C. Underwood, R. L. Greaves, and W. L. Lumpkin as supporting this view. Renihan, “John Spilsbury (1593–c. 1662/1668),” 24.

²⁵John Spilsbury, *A Treatise Concerning the Lawfull Subject of Baptism* (London: Henry Hills, 1652), title page.

Wapping congregation, having followed John Spilsbury upon his death in either 1662 or 1668.²⁶ Norcott contributed to the seventeenth-century literature on baptism with his *Baptism Discovered Plainly and Faithfully, According to the Word of God* (1672). This was the only work which he ever published, but it had a long life, being reprinted ten times.²⁷ The last edition was published over two hundred years after the first printing and was “Corrected and Somewhat Altered” by Charles Haddon Spurgeon.²⁸ Whereas Spilsbury’s work was largely a response to paedobaptist critiques, Norcott’s work was a much more positive biblical treatment of the subject of baptism. For the purpose of this paper, the second edition of *Baptism Discovered Plainly and Faithfully* (1675) which was published in Norcott’s lifetime will be the edition used. Collins served as the third pastor of this historic church. Collins’ principal work on baptism was titled *Believers-Baptism from Heaven, and of Divine Institution. Infants-Baptism from Earth, and Human Invention* (1691) and at 139 pages it is the largest of the three works examined in this paper, more than double the size of either Spilsbury or Norcott’s works. Since these three men advanced very similar arguments for the immersion of believers, their arguments will be examined together in what follows.

These early English Baptists argued for believer’s baptism by immersion based upon what Spilsbury would call “the plain testimony of Scripture.”²⁹ Spilsbury rejected infant baptism, since “there is neither command, or Example in all the New Testament for such practise.”³⁰ Similarly, Collins rejected infant baptism because, as he said, “We have neither precept nor example for that practice in all the Book of God.”³¹ Likewise John Norcott would argue that

²⁶The date of Spilsbury’s death is unknown. According to Renihan, it could have been “as early as 1662 or as late as 1668.” Renihan, “John Spilsbury (1593–c. 1662/1668),” 25.

²⁷1675, 1694, 1700, 1709, 1721, 1722, 1723, 1740, 1801, and 1878.

²⁸John Norcott, *Baptism Discovered Plainly and Faithfully, According to the Word of God* (London: Passmore & Alabaster, 1878), title page.

²⁹Spilsbury, *A Treatise Concerning the Lawfull Subject of Baptism*, “The Epistle to the Reader.”

³⁰Spilsbury, *A Treatise Concerning the Lawfull Subject of Baptism*, “The Epistle to the Reader.”

³¹Collins, *An Orthodox Catechism*, 26-27; Renihan, *True Confessions*, 255.

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.”³² In response to the possible question “Why Sprinkling will not do as well as Dipping?,” Collins provided five reasons:

1. Because that is another thing than Christ hath commanded; and ‘tis high presumption to change God’s Ordinances. . . .
2. In so doing, we lose the End of the Ordinance, which as aforesaid, is to shew forth the Death and Resurrection of Christ.
3. We must keep the Ordinances as they were delivered unto us; as Moses was to make all things according to the Pattern shewed him in the Mount.
4. God is a Jealous God and stands upon small things in Matters of Worship: Had Moses and Aaron but lifted up a Tool upon the Altar of ruff Stone to beautify it, they would have polluted it, because contrary to the Command.
5. This hath no likeness to the holy Examples of Christ and his Apostles.³³

Beside the above text Collins added a marginal note more directly referencing the regulative principle.

‘Tis a known Maxim, to practice anything in the Worship of God, as an Ordinance of his, without an Institution, ought to be esteemed Will-worship & Idolatry. And that there is a necessity for Scripture-Authority to warrant every Ordinance and Practice in Divine Worship, is owned by Luther, Austin, Calvin, Basil, Theoph. Tertul, Mr. Ball; and in the 6th Article of the Church of England; also Bellarmine.³⁴

For Collins then, it was the regulative principle of worship which required the rejection of infant baptism. These Baptist pastors sought to apply the regulative principle more thoroughly than the Reformed/Puritan traditions had done.³⁵

Given the strong views on baptism held by the first three pastors of the Wapping

³²John Norcott, *Baptism Discovered Plainly & Faithfully, According to the Word of God* (London, 1672), 19.

³³Collins, *Believers-Baptism from Heaven*, 19-20.

³⁴Collins, *Believers-Baptism from Heaven*, 20.

³⁵See the chap. 4 for a summary of the classic statements of the regulative principle from Reformed and Puritan authors.

church and these early Baptists' commitment to holding members accountable to the teaching of Scripture, it should come as no surprise that church members were often disciplined for having their infants sprinkled. On October 2, 1677, Charles Cheney was excommunicated for (among other things) "the grand Error of the Baptisme of Infants."³⁶ The next month, the *Wapping Church Book* records that Elizabeth Durbon "was sharply Reproved for the Sin of Sprinkling her Infant Contrary to the Rules of Christ and the Gospel."³⁷ Durbon was not excommunicated because when confronted with her "evill" act, she repented of it and "fell under it before them for doing that which was Contrary to the Command of Christ and the practice of the Apostles and the Constitution of this Church and her own Covenant." Likewise, in September of 1685, a Brother Hemings was brought before the church where he "did there acknowledge his Evele" in the sprinkling of his child.³⁸ It was even considered a serious matter merely to attend an infant's sprinkling. This was apparently considered an endorsement of an unbiblical and disobedient practice. In March of 1685, a Sister Leader was "sharply Reproved" by the church for being present at an infant's sprinkling. No further action was taken against Sister Leader since "she did Acknowledg her falt therin."³⁹ This was apparently an ongoing issue, as nearly a decade later a word of "Advice" was given by the church to midwives who were church members and might be asked to assist in the sprinkling of an infant.

At the same time this Advice was given to the Midwives in our congregation that they be not concerned Nither in the holding the Child at Sprinekling nor at prayers Nor doe not promote nor Incurrige Godfathers nor Godmothers as so Called but that they beare such a testemony for the truthes they ownes against the contrary practise as that they may not defile ther Conscience and as may be an honor to the profession of Christ that they makes of him.⁴⁰

This entry helps to explain why the church would discipline members who attended an infant

³⁶*WCB*, 2 October 1677. The other charges against Cheney were "neglect of his Duty in the Church" and "breaking his word."

³⁷*WCB*, 13 November 1677.

³⁸*WCB*, 22 September 1685.

³⁹*WCB*, 17 March 1685.

⁴⁰*WCB*, 18 September 1694.

sprinkling. These Baptist midwives were instructed not to participate in the ceremony, nor in any way to encourage the process. Their presence would be a condoning of the practice. By not participating, these women would be able to bear witness to their own beliefs as to the proper nature of baptism. In so doing, they would both guarantee a clear conscience and live up to their own profession of faith in Christ. What led to such strong convictions by these early Baptists on the mode and proper recipients of baptism? We turn now to the biblical reasoning for their position on this issue.

Clearly, the mode and meaning of baptism were of great importance to seventeenth-century Baptists. In general, these Baptists argued in three different ways for believers baptism by immersion based upon what John Spilsbury would call “the plain testimony of Scripture.”⁴¹ English Baptists in the seventeenth century used three main types of arguments from Scripture. First, they argued from the meaning of the Greek word *baptizō*. Second, they argued from Great Commission texts. Third, they argued from New Testament example texts.

Definition of “Baptism”

The *First London Confession* of 1644, in the formation of which Spilsbury played a large role, “the way and manner” of baptism is said to be “dipping or plunging the whole body under water.”⁴² This is said to be the case because the “signe, must answer the thing signified.”⁴³ The thing signified was threefold. Namely, the “washing of the whole soule in the blood of Christ”; “the death, buriall, and resurrection” of Christ; and the future physical resurrection of believers.⁴⁴ In his “Epistle to the Reader” in his treatise on baptism, Spilsbury noted that the word *baptizō*, translated “baptism” means “to dipp, wash, or to plunge one into the water.”⁴⁵

⁴¹Spilsbury, *A Treatise Concerning the Lawfull Subject of Baptism*, “The Epistle to the Reader.”

⁴²*The Confession of Faith* (1644), XXXIX; Lumpkin, *Baptist Confessions of Faith*, 167.

⁴³*The Confession of Faith* (1644), XXXIX; Lumpkin, *Baptist Confessions of Faith*, 167.

⁴⁴*The Confession of Faith* (1644), XXXIX; Lumpkin, *Baptist Confessions of Faith*, 167.

⁴⁵Spilsbury, *A Treatise Concerning the Lawfull Subject of Baptism*, “The Epistle to the Reader.”

This, he says, “is the judgement of the most and best learned in the land,” as well as seen “in all the Common Dictionaries.”⁴⁶ This was clearly foundational for Spilsbury. For him, the word *baptizō* simply meant immersion. Thus, any attempt to deny this doctrine was a rejection of “the plain testimony of Scripture.”⁴⁷ Similarly, in the General Baptist Edward Barber’s *A Small Treatise of Baptisme, or, Dipping*, one is hard pressed to even find the word “baptism” after the title page. In the subsequent pages, Barber virtually always substitutes the word “dipping,” or a variant, for “baptism.”⁴⁸ For these first two Baptist defenders of immersion, the meaning of the word *baptizō* was an important part of their argument for baptism by immersion.

Both Norcott and Collins devoted entire chapters to their belief “that baptism is dipping.”⁴⁹ Norcott plainly asserted, “The Greek βαπτίζω” means “to plunge, to overwhelm.”⁵⁰ “Thus,” he said, “Christ was plunged in water.”⁵¹ Further, they “did baptize in Rivers.”⁵² Therefore, he asked, “what need it be in a River, and where there was much water, would not a little in a Bason serve to sprinkle the face?”⁵³ Norcott went on to show that the truths which baptism signifies only makes sense if baptism is a complete plunging underneath the water. “Baptism signifies the Burial of Christ.” Norcott therefore concluded: “Now we do not reckon a man buried, when a little earth is sprinkled on his face: but he is buried when covered, thus you are buried in Baptism.”⁵⁴ Likewise, “Christ’s sufferings are called a Baptism” and “when Christ

⁴⁶Spilsbury, *A Treatise Concerning the Lawfull Subject of Baptism*, “The Epistle to the Reader.”

⁴⁷Spilsbury, *A Treatise Concerning the Lawfull Subject of Baptism*, “The Epistle to the Reader.”

⁴⁸For example, Matt. 28:19 is rendered, “Goe and make Disciples, all Nations, dipping them in the Name of the Father, and of the Sonne, and of the Holy Spirit.” Barber, *A Small Treatise of Baptisme*, 1.

⁴⁹Chapter 4 of Norcott, *Baptism Discovered Plainly and Faithfully*, 16-21; and chapter 3 of Collins, *Believers-Baptism from Heaven*, 11-20.

⁵⁰Norcott, *Baptism Discovered Plainly and Faithfully*, 16.

⁵¹Norcott, *Baptism Discovered Plainly and Faithfully*, 16.

⁵²Norcott, *Baptism Discovered Plainly and Faithfully*, 17.

⁵³Norcott, *Baptism Discovered Plainly and Faithfully*, 17.

⁵⁴Norcott, *Baptism Discovered Plainly and Faithfully*, 17.

suffered he was plunged into pains; . . . from head to foot in pain.”⁵⁵ Norcott summarized his findings:

Thus you see the place where they were Baptized, was a River, their Action, they went down into the Water; then being in the Water, they were Baptized; this was where was much Water. The end was to shew forth Christs Burial. Now if there be not a Burial under water to shew Christs Burial, the great end of the Ordinance is lost, but we are Buried by Baptism.”⁵⁶

As with Spilsbury, so too for Norcott, the word baptism means dipping or immersion.

Hercules Collins began his chapter on “What Baptism is”⁵⁷ by first stating what baptism is not. Collins bluntly declared that baptism is “not sprinkling, dropping, or pouring of Water.”⁵⁸ Instead, “Baptism is an external washing, plunging or dipping a profest Believer, in the Name of the Father, Son, and Holy Ghost.”⁵⁹ The Second London Confession of Faith, of which Collins was a principal signer, states equally as bluntly that, “Immersion, or dipping of the person in water, is necessary to the due administration of this ordinance.”⁶⁰

After stating his conviction that baptism is immersion, Collins proceeds to set out the evidence for his belief. The first evidence that baptism means immersion is taken from the fact that “the word Baptize in the New Testament is taken from the word Dip in the Old.”⁶¹ In other words, the Hebrew equivalent (*tabal*) of the word translated “baptize” (*baptizō*) in the New Testament is always translated “dip” in the Old Testament. This Hebrew word is translated as *baptizō* in the Septuagint. A second evidence is that the “end of the Ordinance sheweth Baptism to be dipping.”⁶² The end to which Collins is referring is the death, burial, and resurrection of

⁵⁵Norcott, *Baptism Discovered Plainly and Faithfully*, 17.

⁵⁶Norcott, *Baptism Discovered Plainly and Faithfully*, 19.

⁵⁷Chapter 3, also labeled “That Baptism is dipping” in the “The Contents.”

⁵⁸Collins, *Believers-Baptism from Heaven*, 11.

⁵⁹Collins, *Believers-Baptism from Heaven*, 11.

⁶⁰*A Confession Of Faith* (1677), 98; Lumpkin, *Baptist Confessions of Faith*, 291.

⁶¹Collins, *Believers-Baptism from Heaven*, 12.

⁶²Collins, *Believers-Baptism from Heaven*, 15.

Christ. There is, Collins said, “no manner of similitude and likeness between Christ’s Death and Burial, with sprinkling a little Water on the Face.” However, “burying in the Water is as lively a Similitude and Likeness of Jesus Christ’s Death., breaking Bread, and pouring out the Wine is at the Lord’s Table.”⁶³ Collins further argued that baptism is immersion by a series of examples and metaphors in a similar manner as Norcott had done previously.⁶⁴ Collins, therefore, concludes very similarly: “Thus you see the Places where the Apostles Baptized, were in Rivers, and where was much Water: You see their Act and Posture, they went down into the Water; you see their End was, to exhibit and shew forth Christ’s Death, Burial, and Resurrection.”⁶⁵

Great Commission Texts

The main way in which the early Baptists argued from Great Commission texts was in regard to the proper order of faith and baptism. Just as preaching the gospel precedes baptism in the Great Commission texts, so too belief in the gospel on the part of the individual should precede their own baptism. Since infants are incapable of understanding and responding to the gospel message in faith, they are not fit, or “lawfull”, subjects for baptism. John Spilsbury argues that if Matthew 28:19 were “well considered, and rightly understood” it “would stop mens mouthes for ever having a word to say for the baptizing of infants.”⁶⁶ This is because “here teaching goes before baptizing, and presupposeth understanding and faith in that which is taught.”⁶⁷ Spilsbury then cites Mark 16:15-16 and declares that these verses “clearly manifest that infants are not the subjects of baptism appointed by Christ; for all the external benefits and privileges of the gospel are given onely to external and visible faith.”⁶⁸ Elsewhere, Spilsbury

⁶³Collins, *Believers-Baptism from Heaven*, 15.

⁶⁴Although Collins rearranges and expands upon Norcott’s work on baptism, the dependence is obvious in certain places, such as here.

⁶⁵Collins, *Believers-Baptism from Heaven*, 19.

⁶⁶Spilsbury, *A Treatise Concerning The Lawfull Subject of Baptism*, 46.

⁶⁷Spilsbury, *A Treatise Concerning The Lawfull Subject of Baptism*, 46.

⁶⁸Spilsbury, *A Treatise Concerning The Lawfull Subject of Baptism*, 46.

even more forcefully averred,

God hath ordained in the Gospel preaching and believing to go before baptizing, as Matt. 28:18, with Mark 16:15-16. And that way or order which hath not God of its Author, and found in the records of Christ, with his image and superscription upon it, let us say as sometime he did, “Give to Caesar that which is Caesars, and to God that which is Gods;” so say I, give to Antichrist his baptizing of infants, and to Christ his baptizing of believers.⁶⁹

In this way Spilsbury used the Great Commission texts to show that faith in the message of the gospel must precede baptism, which makes infant baptism impossible since infants are incapable of faith.

Both John Norcott and Hercules Collins contained detailed expositions of a Great Commission text as the starting point for their works on baptism. Norcott lays a foundation for his rejection of infant baptism by an exposition of Matthew 28:18-20 in which he breaks down the text into eight sections. In his second chapter, Norcott makes repeated references to the order of teaching and then baptizing without making the application to infant baptism. He simply paraphrases the words of Scripture as “when you have taught them, then baptize them.”⁷⁰ In his concluding considerations, Norcott urges his readers to consider “whether it be safe to admit of Consequences against an express Rule, Matt. 28:19, ‘Teach and baptize’.”⁷¹ Clearly, Norcott saw this divine order as forming “an express Rule” that forbids the practice of infant baptism.

Whereas Norcott appeals to the Great Commission as recorded in Matthew 28:19-20, Collins began his discourse on water baptism with the parallel text of Mark 16:16. The text simply states, “He that believeth, and is baptized, shall be saved.” Collins very specifically spelled out the significance of this text. “Here is first Faith,” he writes, “then Baptism.”⁷² Collins then explained the implication of this order.

Therefore to baptize before there be any appearance of Faith, is directly contrary unto this unerring standing Rule, and doth reflect upon our Lord and Lawgiver, as if he spoke rashly and inconsiderately, putting that first which should be last, and that last which should be

⁶⁹Spilsbury, *A Treatise Concerning The Lawfull Subject of Baptism*, 46.

⁷⁰Norcott, *Baptism Discovered Plainly and Faithfully*, 10.

⁷¹Norcott, *Baptism Discovered Plainly and Faithfully*, 58.

⁷²Collins, *Believers-Baptism from Heaven*, 8.

first.⁷³

Collins then proceeded to extrapolate two doctrines from the Great Commission. Doctrine 1: “It’s the unalterable Will of Jesus Christ, who is King and Law-giver to his Gospel-Church, that all Persons believe before they are baptized.”⁷⁴ Doctrine 2: “It’s the indispensable Duty of all true Believers to be Baptized.”⁷⁵ Collins called baptism an indispensable duty for believers, “because I know of no Place where our Lord hath left this to the Liberty of Believers to do it, or leave it undone, as best pleaseth them.”⁷⁶ For early Baptists such as Collins, this was a serious issue. They were not Baptists by default, but by clear conviction. Only one of such deep conviction on this matter could appeal so fervently as Collins did directly to his readers.

Therefore if this be your Lord and Savior’s Will, Believers, pray obey him. In your Prayers you desire you may be enabled to do his Will on Earth as it is in Heaven: This is one part of his Divine Will; Your Redeemer was willing to be baptized in Blood for your Salvation, and will not you be baptized in Water, in obedience to his Commission?⁷⁷

For these men, baptism was not optional for the believer. They argued just as strongly for the necessity of believers being baptized as they did against the baptism of infants. Their basic hermeneutic required them to do so.

New Testament Example Texts

Another type of biblical text used by the early Baptists in their defense of believer’s baptism were those providing examples of baptisms performed in the New Testament. These examples include both the baptism of Jesus by John the Baptist, but also the numerous examples of baptisms in the book of Acts. Most of the arguments based on these examples are short and to the point, but they are sprinkled throughout these texts and deserve some treatment here.

John Norcott began his treatise on baptism in the very first chapter with an account of

⁷³Collins, *Believers-Baptism from Heaven*, 8.

⁷⁴Collins, *Believers-Baptism from Heaven*, 9.

⁷⁵Collins, *Believers-Baptism from Heaven*, 9.

⁷⁶Collins, *Believers-Baptism from Heaven*, 9.

⁷⁷Collins, *Believers-Baptism from Heaven*, 9.

the baptism of Christ in the river of Jordan. Norcott used 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.”⁷⁸ “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.”⁷⁹ Likewise, Hercules Collins cited John 3:23 which states, “John the Baptist baptized in Enon, because there was much water there.” To which Collins responded, “if Sprinkling would have done, there had been no need of much Water nor Rivers.”⁸⁰ Collins elsewhere argued along with Norcott that if Jesus went up out of the water, “common sense signifies” that “He first went down . . . into the water.”⁸¹ This is further seen in the examples from the times of the apostles. The evidence was succinctly summarized by Collins. “Thus you see the Places where the Apostles Baptized, were in Rivers, and where was much Water: You see their Act and Posture, they went down into the Water.”⁸²

In addition to the pithy references referenced above, both Norcott and Collins each devoted an entire chapter to a listing of Scriptures, without commentary, that mention baptism.⁸³ Many of these were further examples of individuals baptized as believers. These Baptist pastors appealed to the examples of the baptism administered by John, the baptism of Jesus, and the numerous examples of baptism in the book of Acts. In these chapters, key texts were merely listed, the argument seemingly being that the overwhelming number of such texts should convince their paedobaptist adversaries. These texts were used both to demonstrate the proper mode of baptism: immersion, and the proper order of baptism: faith preceding water baptism.

⁷⁸Norcott, *Baptism Discovered Plainly and Faithfully*, 5.

⁷⁹Norcott, *Baptism Discovered Plainly and Faithfully*, 5.

⁸⁰Collins, *Believers-Baptism from Heaven*, 16.

⁸¹Collins, *Believers-Baptism from Heaven*, 18.

⁸²Collins, *Believers-Baptism from Heaven*, 19.

⁸³Norcott, *Baptism Discovered Plainly and Faithfully*, 48-51; and, Collins, *Believer's Baptism from Heaven*, 72-76.

Summary

For Spilsbury, Norcott and Collins, it was enough that the word *baptizō* meant to dip, plunge, or immerse. The Great Commission texts mandated the proper order of faith and repentance before baptism. The numerous examples of baptisms described in the New Testament further confirmed both the mode and proper order of baptism. This was “the plain testimony of Scripture.”⁸⁴ Any other mode was a “human invention” and therefore was rebellion against Christ, the Lord of the church. Collins spoke for all the early Baptists when he gave the following reason for writing his book on baptism. His stated purpose was

to display this Sacrament in its apostolic primitive purity, free from the adulterations of men, a sin which God charged upon the learned Jews, that they made void the commands of God by their traditions. O that none of the learned among the Gentiles, especially those of the Reformed churches, may be charged with setting up men’s inventions in the room of Christ’s institutions.⁸⁵

Collins clearly saw the Baptist position as consistent with Reformed thought and correspondingly believed that “the Reformed churches” which practiced infant baptism were being inconsistent with their own self-proclaimed commitment to the regulative principle of worship. Thus, even at this key point of difference between Baptists and their Puritan counterparts, the Baptist position flowed out of an underlying commitment to the Puritan regulative principle of worship.

Conclusion

Collins’ Baptist ecclesiology flowed out of his Puritan/Separatist commitments. His definition of the church was consistent with the definition found in the Church of England’s Thirty-Nine Articles and in the ecclesiological writings of the Puritan Independent John Owen. The difference is that Collins consistently applied this definition and found that it demanded a regenerate church membership. Each church then is governed internally by the congregation, not externally by the state. Since the congregation is composed of regenerate believers filled with the

⁸⁴Spilsbury, *A Treatise Concerning the Lawfull Subject of Baptism*, “The Epistle to the Reader.”

⁸⁵Collins, *Believers-Baptism from Heaven*, 7.

Spirit of Christ, the congregation is itself the ultimate seat of authority in the church. Even the ordinances, the most distinctive elements of Baptist ecclesiology, reflect Reformed/Puritan approach. The immersion of believers was an outworking of the regulative principle of worship and the Lord's Supper was viewed in an identical manner with the Reformed/Puritan tradition as involving a real spiritual presence of Christ. The seventeenth-century English Particular Baptists saw themselves as fitting comfortably within a Puritan framework. We should take their own self-understanding seriously as we study and evaluate them.