

“Dipping is God’s appointment”:  
The mode of baptism among the early Particular Baptists,  
with special reference to John Norcott (d.1676)<sup>1</sup>

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It was during the era of the first English experiment with republican government in the 1650s that the pastor of the Particular Baptist work in Plymouth, Abraham Cheare (1626–1668), received a request from a certain Capt. Francis Langdon in Cornwall, a one-time member of the Barebones Parliament, to come and baptize him.<sup>2</sup> The only problem was that Langdon was suffering from pulmonary tuberculosis and was extremely weak. However, Langdon was quite convinced that God would heal him as he was being baptized. And in this way, the Lord would put his stamp of approval on the immersion of believers as the proper mode of baptism as well as provide a visible refutation of the paedobaptist charge that such an immersion was “a murdering act.”<sup>3</sup> When Cheare travelled to meet Langdon he was horrified to find the latter seemingly close to death. The doctors who had attended him had given up any hope of his recovery. In Cheare’s own words:

...his breath had almost left him, his speech hardly to be perceived, scarce able when he was in his chair to rise upon his feet, and if up, hardly able to step one step without being held up, the very sinews of his neck loosed, that his head hung in his bosom, cough tearing him even to pieces. He had not slept one hour in many nights, only two or three times the week before, as a return of prayers in the particular case put up for him by the servants of the house, at his desire; he could receive in no nourishment but a little milk, he had utterly

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<sup>1</sup> The title comes from John Norcott, *Baptism Discovered Plainly & Faithfully, According to the Word of God*, ed. William Kiffin and Richard Claridge (3<sup>rd</sup> ed.; London, 1694), 20. In this citation as in others in this paper, seventeenth-century capitalization has been modernized. The original spelling, though, has been left unaltered. This paper was originally given at a workshop during the National Convention of The Fellowship of Evangelical Baptist Churches in Canada on November 11, 2014. For help at a few points, I am indebted to Drs. G. Stephen Weaver of Frankfort, Kentucky, C. Jeffrey Robinson of Louisville, Kentucky, who work with me at The Andrew Fuller Center for Baptist Studies at Southern Seminary.

<sup>2</sup> For what follows regarding Cheare and Langdon, see Henry M. Nicholson, *Authentic Records Relating to the Christian Church Now Meeting in George Street and Mutley Chapels, Plymouth: 1640 to 1870* (London: Elliot Stock, 1904), 13–17. This account can also now be found in Brian L. Hanson with Michael A.G. Haykin, *Waiting on the Spirit of Promise: The Life and Theology of Suffering of Abraham Cheare* (Eugene, OR: Pickwick Publications, 2014), 41–45.

<sup>3</sup> See below for an explanation of what was meant by the charge that baptism was “a murdering act.”

laid aside all cordials. And indeed when I saw him at first, I thought he would hardly live till the morning, this was his outward estate.

And to make matters even worse, it was January when Cheare had travelled down to meet Langdon and frost was on the ground.

The place where Langdon was to be baptized was a mill pond about half a mile from his house. Cheare found himself uncertain as to what to do; “the first night after I came,” he later wrote, “was spent in prayer jointly [with other Baptist believers] and privately about the thing, my soul exceedingly clouded and unable to see through it.” Jesus’ words in Luke 4:12—“thou shalt not tempt the Lord thy God”—came to him with particular force and he was of a mind not to follow through with Langdon’s request. Some of the Baptist brethren with Cheare were of this persuasion as well, though there were some present who were convinced like Langdon that God would heal the captain as he was being baptized. Yet others believed that though Langdon might not be healed, he would not be the worse off physically because of the baptism. And so God would “vindicate his ordinance in the sight of all beholders, that it was not of itself destructive to any faithful, obedient person.”

Cheare and his fellow Baptists spent a considerable amount of time in prayer. As they did so, Langdon grew visibly weaker: in Cheare’s words, he “decayed more in one day now, than in a week before.” But he was still insistent on being baptized. When the hour finally arrived for the public baptism, Cheare first baptized two other women. Langdon was then brought to the water side, but Cheare admitted he had not faith to baptize him. Langdon turned to another Baptist brother, a man by the name of Muckle, and asked him if he had faith to baptize him. Muckle did. Cheare later described what then happened:

[B]rother Muckle goeth down with him into the water, and he is led by two or three men, he baptizeth him. Immediately as soon as he is out of the water, he requireth that no person hold him, but strongly, swiftly as one that runneth, he goeth up alone against the hill which was very steep, 50 or 60 feet, and then was led and helped home, declaring that he found at that instant—recovery. He is put into his bed, speaketh strongly and heartily; after the Lord was waited upon for an hour, he calleth for victuals, desires beef and pork, afterwards lieth him down to sleep, and sleeps very well all that night for the space of seven or eight hours; had not one straining pull of the cough that night, when he waketh, he saith, he could have slept longer, but was unwilling to have the friends depart till he had spoken of the salvation of God. He is very hearty all the morning, ariseth about noon, but tarried not long up, saying, he found the bed more comfortable than the fire, and I think had some faintness,

but still declared that he lived by faith to have the cure perfected by degrees, as his weakness grew by degrees. He rejoiced much that the Lord had so manifestly owned his ordinance...<sup>4</sup>

Now what is significant about this text with regard to the mode of baptism is that there appears to have been no thought given to finding an easy way out through the use of an alternative mode for the baptism of Langdon, such as pouring or sprinkling. The reason is simple: for Cheare and his fellow Baptists, baptism meant one thing—immersion. As Cheare’s contemporary, the London Baptist pastor John Norcott, put it in an extremely popular tract on this subject: “Baptism is dipping or plunging. ...Dipping is God’s appointment.”<sup>5</sup>

### *Responding to critics of immersion*

Various charges were made against the Baptists when they emerged from the matrix of Puritanism in the seventeenth century. For instance, they were accused of being violent, social revolutionaries akin to those sixteenth-century Anabaptists who had believed that the kingdom of God could be set up by force of arms and who had sought to do so by seizing the town of Münster in Germany from February 1534 to June 1535. Over the course of these sixteen months the inhabitants of Münster were terrorized by Jan Matthyss and Jan Bockelson, a.k.a. John of Leyden, who established a theocracy in which all property was held in common, polygamy legalized and adultery punished with death. English Baptists were also accused of “doing acts unseemly in the dispensing the ordinance of baptism, not to be named amongst Christians,”<sup>6</sup> and endangering people’s health when they baptized people in ponds, rivers, and lakes in the northern clime of England. Now, the latter two charges both relate to the mode of baptism practiced by seventeenth-century Particular Baptists, namely immersion. For example, Daniel Featley (1582–1645), an outspoken Calvinistic minister devoted to the Church of England and bitter critic of Puritanism, penned a scurrilous attack on the Baptists entitled *The Dippers dipt. Or, The Anabaptists duck’d and plunged Over Head and Eares* (1645), complete with a racy frontispiece depicting Baptist women being baptized in the nude! In it he maintained that the

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<sup>4</sup> For a similar miracle during baptism, see J. Ivimey, “A Wonderful Appearance of Providence at Baptism”, *The Baptist Magazine*, 10 (1818), 257. The Victorian Baptist author G. Holden Pike regarded this link between baptism and healing as a “delusion” and verging on fanaticism. See his “A Western Pastor in the Olden Time”, *The Sword and the Trowel* (September 1, 1870), 407.

<sup>5</sup> *Baptism Discovered*, 21, 20.

<sup>6</sup> *The First London Confession of Faith*, Preface (William L. Lumpkin, *Baptist Confessions of Faith* [2<sup>nd</sup> ed.; Valley Forge: Judson Press, 1969], 154–155).

Baptists were in the habit of stripping “stark naked, not onely when they flocke in great multitudes, men and women together, to their Jordans to be dipt; but also upon other occasions, when the season permits”!<sup>7</sup> This charge was serious enough to merit refutation in the *First London Confession* of 1644, the doctrinal standard of the first generation of English Particular Baptists, where it was specified that the baptism of believers was carried out with “convenient garments both upon the administrator and subject, with all modestie.”<sup>8</sup> Later in the century James Owen (1654–1706), a well-respected and learned Welsh Nonconformist, leveled similar charges.<sup>9</sup> On this occasion, Benjamin Keach (1640–1704), the leading Baptist theologian of the late seventeenth century, answered Owen directly:

We provide comely cloathes for the administrer, both from head to foot; and our men also that are baptized have cloathes provided for them; and for the women, gowns and petty-coats are made on purpose, and they go into the water dressed more decently perhaps, than many women came into Christian assemblies.<sup>10</sup>

Baptists were also accused of using baptism as a way of murdering people—hence the reference in Cheare’s account to believer’s baptism as “a murdering act.” William Burkitt (1650–1713), the Anglican rector of Mildenhall, Suffolk, argued that immersion entailed a breach of the sixth commandment, “Thou shalt not kill,” for “how many thousand persons strong and weak, old and young, would this plunging over head and ears in northern countries, and in the winter season infallibly destroy and make an end of?”<sup>11</sup> The Presbyterian theologian Richard Baxter

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<sup>7</sup> Cited Gordon Kingsley, “Opposition to Early Baptists (1638–1645)”, *Baptist History and Heritage*, 4, no.1 (January, 1969), 29. On Daniel Featley, see further W.J. McGlothlin, “Dr. Daniel Featley and the First Calvinistic Baptist Confession”, *The Review and Expositor*, 6 (1909), 579–589. For the charge of sexual immorality, see also J.F. McGregor, “The Baptists: Fount of All Heresy” in his and B. Reay, eds., *Radical Religion in the English Revolution* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1984), 41–42; James Barry Vaughn, “Public Worship and Practical Theology in the Work of Benjamin Keach (1640–1704)” (PhD Thesis, University of St. Andrews, 1989), 60; and Linford D. Fisher, J. Stanley Lemons, and Lucas Mason-Brown, *Decoding Roger Williams: The Lost Essay of Rhode Island’s Founding Father* (Waco, TX: Baylor University Press, 2014), 25.

<sup>8</sup> *First London Confession of Faith* XL margin (Lumpkin, *Baptist Confessions of Faith*, 167).

<sup>9</sup> For details, see Austin Walker, *The Excellent Benjamin Keach* (Dundas, ON: Joshua Press, 2004), 309–331. For Owen, see R.T. Jenkins, “Owen, James”, *The Dictionary of Welsh Biography Down to 1940* (London: The Honourable Society of Cymmrodorion, 1959), 708; Alexander Gordon, “Owen, James”, *The Dictionary of National Biography*, ed. Leslie Steophen and Sidney Lee (1894–1895 ed; repr. London: Oxford University Press, 1937–1938), 14:1313–1314; Vaughn, “Public Worship and Practical Theology”, 39–40.

<sup>10</sup> *Light broke forth in Wales, Expelling Darkness; or The Englishman’s Love to the Antient Britons* (London, 1696), 261.

<sup>11</sup> *An Argumentative and Practical Discourse of Infant-Baptism* (2<sup>nd</sup> ed.; London: Thomas Parkhurst, 1695), 55. For a brief essay on Burkitt’s life and writings, see Richard J. Ginn, *The Labour of Love: William Burkitt and his Ministry at Dedham 1692–1703* (2<sup>nd</sup> ed.; Dedham, Essex: Dedham Ecclesiastical Lectureship Trust, 2005).

(1615–1691), an intrepid controversialist, also argued that believer’s baptism was a breach of the sixth commandment. As he elaborated:

[T]he ordinary practice of baptizing by dipping over head in cold water...is no ordinance of God, but an heinous sin... the magistrate ought to restrain it, to save the lives of his subjects... For, that which directly tendeth to overthrow men’s lives, being wilfully used, is plain murder: But the ordinary or general dipping of people over head in the cold water, doth tend directly to the overthrow of their health and lives; and therefore it is murder. ...Catarrhs and obstructions, which are the two great fountains of most mortal diseases in man’s body, could scarce have a more notable means to produce them where they are not, or to increase them where they are. ...Apoplexies, lethargies, palsies, and all comatous diseases, would be promoted by it. So would...debility of the stomach,...and almost all fevers, dysenteries, diarrhoeas, colics,...convulsions, spasms, tremors, etc. ...I conclude, if murder be a sin, then dipping ordinarily in cold water over head, in England, is a sin.<sup>12</sup>

As we saw, Cheare’s account of the healing of Langdon while he was being baptized was one way of answering this charge. Another was that of Keach in his classic defence of believer’s baptism, *Gold Refin’d; or, Baptism in its Primitive Purity* (1689). Citing Matthew 28:19–20, which he called “the great Commission,”<sup>13</sup> he asked his readers to:

Note the extent of the Commission here given by Christ to his disciples, “Go teach all nations, baptizing them.” Go into all nations; or, as Mark has it, “Into all the world” (Mark 16:15). East as well as west, north as well as south, into cold countries as well as hot, and make disciples wherever you come, and “baptize” them etc., not rantize [i.e. sprinkle] them; not dip them in hot climates, and sprinkle them in cold.<sup>14</sup>

Keach’s argument here for immersion is also essentially that of John Norcott’s lapidary remark that “dipping is God’s appointment.” According to Keach’s reading of the Great Commission, it does not permit the adaptation of the initiatory rite of Christianity to the type of climate in which the gospel was preached: whether the weather was hot or cold, disciples were to be baptized by immersion. The Great Commission has fixed the details of God’s ordinance as it relates to both mode and subject such that they cannot be changed.

<sup>12</sup> *Plain Scripture Proof of Infants Church-membership and Baptism* (4<sup>th</sup> ed.; London, 1656), 134–136, *passim*.

<sup>13</sup> *Gold Refin’d; or, Baptism in its Primitive Purity* (London, 1689), 64.

<sup>14</sup> *Gold Refin’d*, 65. Norcott has the very same reasoning; see *Baptism Discovered*, 10.

*John Norcott and his tract on baptism*

The seventeenth-century British ecclesial scene witnessed a host of Christian groups claiming that they had recovered the blueprint of the New Testament when it came to the nature of the church and its rites: Anglican, Presbyterian, Independent or Congregationalist, Baptist, Quaker, Muggletonian, to name simply the most prominent groups. Of all these groups, only the Baptists baptized believers, and only the Baptists employed the mode of immersion despite the criticisms noted above. Not surprisingly, their defence of their position in treatises and tracts on this subject were legion. William H. Brackney reckons the number of them to be more than a hundred.<sup>15</sup> In examining their defence of the mode of immersion, this paper primarily focuses on what was probably the most popular of these tracts, John Norcott's *Baptism Discovered Plainly & Faithfully According to the Word of God* (1672).

When Norcott wrote this work, he was serving as the second pastor of the Particular Baptist Church in Wapping, London. This congregation was the earliest Particular Baptist congregation in the British Isles, having come into existence in the 1630s, when its first pastor, John Spilsbury (1593–1662/1668) had come to clear Baptist convictions.<sup>16</sup> Spilsbury was actually the first Particular Baptist to write on believer's baptism; his pamphlet *A Treatise Concerning the Lawfull Subject of Baptisme* had appeared in 1643.<sup>17</sup> Norcott's own roots were within the Church of England. He was a Puritan-minded minister who had been forced to leave the state church when the Act of Uniformity was passed in 1662. He became pastor of the Wapping congregation around 1670. Benjamin Keach, who preached Norcott's funeral sermon, called him "a most sweet and choice Preacher."<sup>18</sup>

<sup>15</sup> *The Baptists* (Westport, CT: Praeger, 1994), 57.

<sup>16</sup> Robert W. Oliver, *From John Spilsbury to Ernest Kevan: The Literary Contribution of London's Oldest Baptist Church* (London: Grace Publications Trust for The Evangelical Library, 1985), 6. For the history of the church, see Ernest F. Kevan, *London's Oldest Baptist Church: Wapping 1633—Walthamstow 1933* (London: Kingsgate Press, 1933).

<sup>17</sup> Thus B.R. White, *The English Baptists of the Seventeenth Century* (Rev. ed.; London: The Baptist Historical Society, 1996), 72. Garry Stephen Weaver has noted: "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" ("Hercules Collins: Orthodox, Puritan, Baptist" [PhD dissertation, The Southern Baptist Theological Seminary, 2013], 163).

<sup>18</sup> Cited Kevan, *London's Oldest Baptist Church*, 62. For further details about Norcott, see Joseph Ivimey, *A History of the English Baptists* (London: B.J. Holdsworth, 1823), III, 295–301; Kevan, *London's Oldest Baptist Church*, 62–64; Geoffrey F. Nuttall, "Another Baptist Ejection (1662): The Case of John Norcott" in William H. Brackney and Paul S. Fiddes with John H.Y. Briggs, eds., *Pilgrim Pathways: Essays in Baptist History in Honour of B.R. White* (Macon, GA: Mercer University Press, 1999), 185–188.

Norcott's tract on baptism enjoyed enormous popularity over the next 240 years.<sup>19</sup> It was reprinted in new editions in 1675, 1694, 1700, and 1709, the last at a printing press in Dublin. It then appeared in four separate editions between 1721 and 1723, with one of these being the first American edition. A further fifteen reprintings occurred between the 1720s and 1911, with Charles Haddon Spurgeon (1834–1892) bringing out at least three separate editions with fairly large print-runs between 1878 and 1887. It had also been translated into Welsh by the time of the third edition (1694)<sup>20</sup>—which is the edition that has been used in this paper. In the late nineteenth century, there was a second Welsh edition and translations into German, Turkish, Armenian, Spanish and Bulgarian.

In the relatively small compass of fifty-six pages—the page-count of the third edition—Norcott's tract sets forth the standard seventeenth-century Baptist positions on the proper subjects of baptism (believers),<sup>21</sup> the correct mode (immersion),<sup>22</sup> and the meaning of baptism (primarily identification with Christ in his death, burial and resurrection).<sup>23</sup> It is noteworthy that the question as to who can be the proper administrator of baptism, an issue that troubled some in the seventeenth century like John Smyth (d. 1612) and Roger Williams (c.1604–1683), is not discussed at any length by Norcott. From the examples of Paul baptizing the Corinthians Crispus, Gaius and Stephanas (1 Cor 1:14–15) and Phillip baptizing the Ethiopian (Acts 8:38), Norcott affirms that “he that is called to be a preacher, needs no call to baptize,” since “baptism fell in as a part of his preaching office.”<sup>24</sup> Norcott also seeks to demonstrate that the baptism of the Spirit

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<sup>19</sup> For the details of this paragraph, see Edward C. Starr, *A Baptist Bibliography* (Rochester, NY: American Baptist Historical Society, 1972), 17:73–75; Fisher, Lemons, and Mason-Brown, *Decoding Roger Williams*, 1, 3. For the most recent printing of Norcott's tract, see Fisher, Lemons, and Mason-Brown, *Decoding Roger Williams*, 115–152.

Apart from this tract on baptism, it appears that Norcott's only other publication was a prefatory letter to Josias Bonham, *The Churches Glory: or, The Becoming Ornament* (London, 1674), [xiii–xvii]. Benjamin Keach also wrote a commendatory letter for this book.

<sup>20</sup> *Baptism Discovered*, [iii].

<sup>21</sup> *Baptism Discovered*, 11–17.

<sup>22</sup> *Baptism Discovered*, 17–21.

<sup>23</sup> *Baptism Discovered*, 17, 20.

<sup>24</sup> *Baptism Discovered*, 42–43. See also Norcott, *Baptism Discovered*, 3, for a comment on John the Baptist as an administrator of baptism. In his tract *The shining of a Flaming Fire in Zion* (London: Jane Coe, 1646), Hanserd Knollys (1599–1691) especially dealt with this issue and concluded, speaking for the London Particular Baptists: “We do not affirm that every common disciple may baptize...or...administer other ordinances; unless he have received such gifts of the Spirit, as fitteth, or inableth him to preach the Gospel” (p.9).

is no substitute for water-baptism<sup>25</sup>—the position of the Quakers—and why the baptism of infants is unbiblical.<sup>26</sup>

### *Defending immersion*

Norcott's defence of immersion ran along four lines. First, there was the etymological argument that the Greek verb *baptizō* and its cognates entail immersion since properly translated the verb means "to plunge, to overwhelm."<sup>27</sup> In support of these renditions of *baptizō*, Norcott referred his readers to the baptism of Jesus in Matthew 3:16 and Jesus' comparison of his cross-work to a *baptisma* in Luke 12:50—he was "plunged into sorrow for our sakes."<sup>28</sup> With regard to the first text—which the King James Version (1611) had translated "Jesus, when he was baptized, went up straightway out of the water."—Norcott reasoned that Jesus could not have "come out of the water, had he not been in."<sup>29</sup> Norcott also cited the fact that, according to John 3:23, John the Baptist would frequently baptize at Aenon, near Salim on the River Jordan "because there was much water there" (KJV). Why the mention of "much water," Norcott asked rhetorically, if John was not immersing those who heeded his call to repentance—"would not a little in a bason serve to sprinkle the face?"<sup>30</sup>

A second consideration had to do with the meaning of baptism. Stephen Holmes has noted that historically this is an area in which Baptists have not really excelled despite their intense concern with the proper subjects and correct mode of baptism.<sup>31</sup> Yet, the earliest Particular Baptist

<sup>25</sup> *Baptism Discovered*, 23–24, 30–31

<sup>26</sup> *Baptism Discovered*, 31–47, 52–54.

<sup>27</sup> *Baptism Discovered*, 17. See the similar arguments by Hercules Collins, *Believers-Baptism from Heaven, and of Divine Institution. Infants-Baptism from Earth, and Human Invention* (London, 1691), 12–14. Collins followed Norcott as the pastor of the Wapping church. His tract on baptism is deeply indebted to that of Norcott. See also B.W. Ball, *The English Connection: The Puritan Roots of Seventh-day Adventist Belief* (Greenwood, SC: Attic Press, 1981), 94–95.

<sup>28</sup> *Baptism Discovered*, 18.

<sup>29</sup> *Baptism Discovered*, 5. See also *Baptism Discovered*, 19, 20–21.

<sup>30</sup> *Baptism Discovered*, 17. See the similar argumentation of Hanserd Knollys, *Flaming Fire in Zion*, 3, and that of the texts cited by Ball, *English Connection*, 94.

<sup>31</sup> "Baptists" in Hans Dieter Betz, Don S. Browning, Bernd Janowski and Eberhard Jüngel, ed., *Religion Past & Present* *Encyclopedia of Theology and Religions* (Leiden/Boston: Brill, 2007), I, 587–588. This is a section of a much larger article on "Baptism." William H. Brackney has similarly noted: "From their intense preoccupation over textual details in the New Testament and a desire to re-create the primitive Church, Baptists have spent their energies on the techniques, styles, and fitness of candidates for participation in the sacraments, rather than the mystery of the divine-human relationships" (*Baptists*, 69–70). For an earlier judgment along similar lines, see J.M. Ross, "The Theology of Baptism in Baptist History", *The Baptist Quarterly*, 15 (1953–1954), 100.

For two studies of the theology of baptism in the larger Particular Baptist tradition, see J.R.C. Perkin, "Baptism in Nonconformist Theology, 1820–1920, with special reference to the Baptists" (D.Phil. thesis, Oxford University,

confession, *The First London Confession* (1644), did delineate three meanings to baptism in its Article XL. First, it bears witness to the inner washing of the believer by the blood of Christ. In later editions of the *Confession*—those of 1646, 1651, and 1653—this meaning was omitted.<sup>32</sup> Second, it signifies the believer’s “death, buriall, and resurrection” with Christ. Finally, it helps to give the believer assurance that, just as he or she is raised up from the waters of baptism, “so certainly shall the bodies of the Saints be raised by the power of Christ, in the day of the resurrection.”<sup>33</sup> Norcott only made explicit reference to the second of these meanings. Since baptism signifies burial with Christ—Norcott cited Romans 6:4 and Colossians 2:12 as proof—the proper mode has to be immersion, since “we do not reckon a man buried, when a little earth is sprinkled on his face; but he is buried when covered.”<sup>34</sup> For Norcott, this is the chief meaning of baptism: “if there be not a burial under water to shew Christ’s burial, the great end of the ordinance is lost.”<sup>35</sup>

Norcott also noted that baptism, according to Galatians 3:27—“as many of you as are baptized into Christ have put on Christ”—is “a putting on Christ.” He likened this Pauline phrase to what a servant does when he wears his master’s distinctive livery—it identifies him as “a servant to such a Lord.”<sup>36</sup> In other words, baptism is the means whereby we declare ourselves to belong to Christ.

Third, baptism by immersion has been commanded by Christ, and Christ’s servants do not have the freedom to change their Lord’s commands. Since “baptism is dipping or plunging,” sprinkling simply will not “serve, because it is not what God hath appointed. . . . Is not God wise enough to appoint his own worship how it shall be performed?”<sup>37</sup> Here, the overall shape of Norcott’s argument comes from decades of battles within the Church of England over worship. In these battles, Norcott’s Puritan forebears had maintained that God’s Word is the rule of his worship and that Christians can only include among the elements of worship that which has clear

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1955); and Stanley K. Fowler, *More Than A Symbol: The British Baptist Recovery of Baptismal Sacramentalism* (Studies in Baptist History and Thought, vol. 2; Carlisle, Cumbria/Waynesboro, GA: Paternoster Press, 2002).

<sup>32</sup> It is noteworthy that Henry Jessey (1603–1663), out of whose church many of the earliest Particular Baptists had come, described the meaning of baptism as “signifying, representing, and sealing up” to those who are baptized “the remission, and washing away of their sins” (*Miscellanea Sacra: or, Diverse necessary Truths* [London: Livewell Chapman, 1665], 128).

<sup>33</sup> *First London Confession of Faith* XL (Lumpkin, *Baptist Confessions of Faith*, 167).

<sup>34</sup> *Baptism Discovered*, 17–18.

<sup>35</sup> *Baptism Discovered*, 19. See also *Baptism Discovered*, 20. Similarly, for Collins, “they lose one great end of this ordinance, who rantize [i.e. sprinkle] instead of baptize” (*Believers-Baptism from Heaven*, 15).

<sup>36</sup> *Baptism Discovered*, 18–19. See also Collins, *Believers-Baptism from Heaven*, 17.

<sup>37</sup> *Baptism Discovered*, 20. See also *Baptism Discovered*, 21, and Collins, *Believers-Baptism from Heaven*, 20.

warrant from the Word of God. It is noteworthy that the third edition of Norcott's baptismal tract contains a recommendatory preface written by the famous London Baptist William Kiffin (1616–1701) and a certain Richard Claridge (1649–1723),<sup>38</sup> which emphasized that a biblicistic perspective lay at the heart of Norcott's ministry:

He steered his whole course, by the compass of the Word, making Scripture-precept, or example, his constant rule in matters of religion: Other men's opinions or interpretations were not the standard by which he went; but, through the assistance of the Holy Spirit, he labour'd to find out what the Lord himself had said in his Word.<sup>39</sup>

Norcott's biblicism is very evident in his insistence that Christ has commanded us to follow a certain pattern when it comes to the mode of baptism, which is immersion. In Norcott's words: "Dipping is God's appointment."<sup>40</sup> All of the examples of believer's baptism in the New Testament,<sup>41</sup> and, above all the baptism of the believer's "great pattern, the Lord Jesus," confirm this conviction, for they were all by immersion.<sup>42</sup>

### *Norcott's legacy*

D.M. Himbury has noted that many of the arguments developed by Baptists like Norcott in the seventeenth century with regard to baptism remained virtually unchanged over the next two hundred years.<sup>43</sup> Anne Dutton (1692–1765), who has been well described as "perhaps the most theologically capable and influential Baptist woman of her day,"<sup>44</sup> thus reproduced Norcott's argument from the verb *baptizō*—"the word...signifies to dip, bury, or overwhelm"—and his

<sup>38</sup> Claridge became a Quaker in 1697. See Ivimey, *History of the English Baptists*, III, 300, n.\*, and 361.

<sup>39</sup> "The Epistle Dedicatory" to Norcott, *Baptism Discovered*, [ii–iii]. Cf. the biblicism in C.H. Spurgeon, "Preface" to John Norcott, *Baptism Discovered Plainly & Faithfully, According to the Word of God* (London: Passmore & Alabaster, 1878), iv–v.

<sup>40</sup> Norcott, *Baptism Discovered*, 20.

<sup>41</sup> Norcott, *Baptism Discovered*, 11–17.

<sup>42</sup> Norcott, *Baptism Discovered*, 7, 5. On Christ as an example when it comes to baptism, see also Norcott, *Baptism Discovered*, 3–4.

<sup>43</sup> "Baptismal Controversies, 1640–1900" in A. Gilmore, ed., *Christian Baptism: A Fresh Attempt to Understand the Rite in terms of Scripture, History, and Theology* (Chicago, IL/Philadelphia, PA/Los Angeles, CA: Judson Press, 1959), 305.

<sup>44</sup> Karen O'Dell Bullock, "Dutton [*née* Williams], Anne", *Oxford Dictionary of National Biography*, Oxford University Press, 2004; online ed., Jan 2009 (<http://www.oxforddnb.com.libaccess.lib.mcmaster.ca/view/article/71063>, accessed July 9, 2014). For an excellent study of her life, piety, and influence, see also Michael D. Sciretti, Jr., "Feed My Lambs": The Spiritual Direction Ministry of Calvinistic British Baptist Anne Dutton During the Early Years of the Evangelical Revival" (PhD thesis, Baylor University, 2009).

emphasis that immersion best represents burial in a pamphlet on baptism that she published in 1746.<sup>45</sup> Norcott's arguments for the mode of baptism even found a poetic voice in the baptismal hymns of Maria de Fleury (*fl.* 1773–1791), the most widely recognized female writer among London's Calvinistic Dissenters between 1781 and 1791:

Come, Sinners, sav'd by love divine,  
With awful wonder, come and see  
Sweet grace, and matchless glory shine,  
In him who died for you and me. . . .

We to the sacred stream descend,  
In grateful memory of thee;  
Our dying, all-triumphant friend,  
We celebrate thy victory:  
Buried with Christ, by Faith we rise,  
And reign with him above the skies.<sup>46</sup>

In the last quarter of the following century, as has been noted above, the Victorian Baptist preacher Spurgeon reprinted Norcott's tract with minor alterations: he modernized the language in a few places, clarified a few phrases so as "to make the author's sense yet more plain to the reader," and made a few additions.<sup>47</sup> Obviously Spurgeon believed that the bulk of Norcott's tract had stood the test of time and was still a powerful defence of believer's baptism by immersion—a conviction that, to this writer, does not seem to have been misplaced.

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<sup>45</sup> *Brief Hints concerning Baptism: Of the Subject, Mode, and End of this Solemn Ordinance* (London: J. Hart, 1746), 12.

<sup>46</sup> Hymn VII in *Hymns for Believer's Baptism* (London, 1786), 12–13.

<sup>47</sup> "Preface" to Norcott, *Baptism Discovered*, vi.