

Water baptism as church membership identity in Nigeria



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Dates:

Received: 31 Jan. 2022

Accepted: 15 Mar. 2022

Published: 29 June 2022

How to cite this article:

Ademiluka, S.O., 2022, 'Water baptism as church membership identity in Nigeria', *In die Skriflig* 56(1), a2842. <https://doi.org/10.4102/ids.v56i1.2842>

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In the New Testament (NT), water baptism symbolises forgiveness of sins for the baptised, and their identification with Jesus Christ and the church as a body, but not the means of salvation. Most Nigerian churches involve baptism in certain practices, which apparently treat baptism as proof of salvation. This article examined such practices and assessed the extent to which they conform to the NT purpose of baptism. Employing the historical and descriptive methods, this research found that in the NT baptism was the means of public confession of Jesus as one's Lord. Although several passages in the gospels and Acts give the impression that salvation is tied to baptism, there are many NT passages which make salvation absolutely God's grace. This article discovered some church practices in Nigeria that suggest that water baptism is necessary for salvation. This attitude is seen in individual denominations making baptism their membership identity. Some other practices treat baptism as proof of salvation and holiness, which include denial of baptism and full membership to polygamists and making baptism a prerequisite for certain privileges. This article concluded that these practices contradict the NT purpose of baptism in that it was intended for identification with Christ and the universal church, not as membership identity of local church groups, or evidence of holiness.

Contribution: This research is a contribution in New Testament theology. It argues that the adoption of water baptism as church membership identity in Nigeria, contradicts the original purpose of the sacrament.

Keywords: water baptism; John the Baptist; New Testament baptism; membership identity; Nigerian churches.

Introduction

In Christianity, water baptism refers to the sacrament of admission into the church, which is performed 'by the pouring or sprinkling ... or by immersion in water' (Ekpenyong & Ntamu 2014:152). It symbolises the washing away of the sins of the persons being baptised, and their identification with the life and death of Jesus as well as the church as a body (Klaver 2011:472). In other words, through water baptism, 'Christians are brought into union with Christ [and] with each other' (Komolafe 2016:31). In Nigeria, most denominations believe in and practise baptism, but in varied ways. While some perform the act by immersion, others do it by pouring water on the head or sprinkling it on the body. Some, like the Roman Catholic and the Anglican Communion practise infant baptism, but most of the others baptise only grown up youths and adults. Nonetheless, in most churches water baptism is the means of membership identity. The aspects of the subject are many, but in this article the focus is only on the doctrine, as it relates to church membership. In other words, it excludes the controversies on the modes of baptism and infant baptism. The aim is to examine the practices involved in the use of water baptism in Nigerian churches as membership identity, and to interrogate the extent to which this practice conforms to the original intent of the sacrament. The article employs historical analysis for the study of baptism in the Bible and in the history of the church, and the descriptive approach for the discourse of the practice of water baptism in Nigeria. It begins with an overview of baptism in the New Testament (NT) and in the history of the church. After this, the work examines the significance of the doctrine in the NT; and finally, it appraises the employment of baptism as church membership identity in Nigeria from the NT perspective.

An overview of water baptism in the New Testament and in the history of the church

It is rarely disputed that the 'first clear text for water baptism' comes from the NT, specifically the gospels (DeWitt 2017:2). Mark 1:4-5 states:

John the baptizer appeared in the wilderness preaching a baptism of repentance for the forgiveness of sins. And all the country of Judea was going out to him, and all the people of Jerusalem; and they were being baptized by him in the Jordan River, confessing their sins. (cf. Mt 3:5-6 – Revised Standard Version [RSV])¹

What is not certain, is the source of John's baptism. Jurgensmeier (n.d.) attests that 'the kind of baptism that John the Baptist implemented was [not] commonly practiced'. Some of the Roman mystery religions had initiatory rites which involved bathing with water, but many scholars affirm that these rites are absolutely different from John's baptism (DeWitt 2017:3) DeWitt (2017:3) notes that John could not have got 'his baptism from the pagan world [as] no sincere Jew would do that'. Moreover, it is a well-known fact that the mystery religions were not known in the Roman Empire until the days of Paul, that is, several decades after the ministry of John the Baptist. Formerly, some scholars attempted to trace John's baptism and the subsequent Christian practice to the Jewish proselyte baptism, the ritual of converting to Judaism (Beasley-Murray 1974:19). They held that there were similarities in that both were 'by full immersion' and for conversion (Jurgensmeier n.d.; cf. DeWitt 2017:3), hence Jewish proselyte baptism 'was simply adopted by John the Baptist' (DeWitt 2017:3). This proposition, however, failed to see the clear differences in the two systems. For instance, as noted by DeWitt (2017:3), while in proselyte baptism 'a person dipped himself or herself in water', John administered baptism for those baptised. Also, while John's practice required repentance in order to enter the kingdom of God, 'proselyte washing was to join Judaism' (DeWitt 2017:3). Moreover, John's baptism most likely predated Jewish proselyte baptism in view of the fact that the first clear reference for the latter 'is in the Jewish *Mishna* in a writing dated around A.D. 90', that is, about 60 years post the emergence of John (Beasley-Murray 1974, cited in Jurgensmeier n.d.). Beasley-Murray (1974:19) wonders why there is no clear testimony to proselyte baptism in the writings of the pre-Christian Jewish philosophers like Philo and Josephus as well as in the NT, if it was a 'universally accepted institution in Judaism before the Christian era'. It is therefore unlikely that the baptism of John and that of the Christians derived from the Jewish practice. It is possible that both proselyte baptism and the Christian model began with John (DeWitt 2017:3).

In recent times, it has become more common to seek for the origins of John's baptismal practice in the context of the Old Testament (OT) and Jewish customs (Groenewald 2003:370). The OT contains accounts of various forms of ceremonial washing, such as washing with water after touching a dead body (Lv 11:25), after being cured of a skin disease (Lv 13:4), and after bodily discharges (Lv 15). There was also the custom of the high priest washing himself on the Day of Atonement (Lv 16:4; Ezk 44:19). From archaeology, it has been proved that similar ceremonial washings were carried on in later Jewish traditions, particularly 'in the Essene

community at Qumran' (DeWitt 2017:1; cf. Jurgensmeier n.d.). DeWitt (2017) states that:

The Qumran (and apparently other communities) used a dipping process in a mikvah tub² of moving water as an initiation rite and for ceremonial cleansings. John was a Levite priest by birth and would be keenly aware of all the Old Testament ceremonial washings for purification. [He] lived in the Judean Wilderness, near the Qumran community, so he would be aware of their mikvah tub washings. (p. 3)

Groenewald (2003:370) may therefore be right when he opines that John's baptism of full immersion in water 'was most probably influenced by the Levitical washings' (cf. Collins 1996:218). DeWitt thus plausibly suggests that John must have adapted his baptism from the Qumran traditions. Thus, the origins of John's baptism cannot be separated from his appearance in the wilderness, that is, his prophetic calling. John identified himself as 'a voice crying in the wilderness' for preparation for the Messiah's appearance (DeWitt 2017:3; cf. Mt 3:11). In other words, his mode of baptism was part of the prophetic ministry he received from God. As expressed by Jurgensmeier (n.d.), when John, the son of Zechariah, received his revelation in the desert (Lk 1:80; 3:2), 'he was not only given a message and a mission but [also] a method for people to demonstrate repentance to God'. But with the addition of the demand for repentance for the forgiveness of sins (Mt 3:11; Mk 1:4; Lk 3:3), John changed 'the ritual washings of the Second Temple period to a single baptism functioning as an initiation into God's eschatological kingdom' (Groenewald 2003:370).

The nature of John's ministry seems to buttress the idea of his baptism, initiating people into a new theocratic order meant to replace the old one. He apparently perceived a looming judgement on sin, for which reason he proclaimed a baptism 'for a washing away of the stains and corruption that had come on the Jewish nation' (Baham 2020:13; cf. Lk 3:7-10). Hence, Hughes (1972:200) identifies John's role as that of an 'eschatological prophet, the herald of the coming intervention ... by Yahweh himself'. This would explain the Baptist's central message to those who came for his baptism: 'Repent, for the kingdom of heaven is at hand' (Mt 3:2). John's baptism seems to have re-awakened his people's messianic expectations so much, that some thought he was the Christ (Lk 3:15). But John knew that he was only the forerunner of the Messiah. He 'himself was looking forward to the Messiah and waiting for him to come on the scene' (Baham 2020:13; cf. Lk 3:16).

Jesus himself was baptised by John, an event which the three gospels connect 'with the installation of Jesus as son of God' (Zimmermann 2020:85; cf. Mt 3:13-17; Mk 1:9-11; Lk 3:21-22). Apart from this, there are records of baptism in the gospels and the Acts of the Apostles. The book of John (3:22, 26; 4:1-3) reports acts of baptising by Jesus' disciples. Matthew and Mark narrate that after the resurrection, Jesus gave the command to his disciples to evangelise the whole

1.Except otherwise stated, all the Bible references quoted are from the RSV.

2.'The mikvah was like a bathtub but with water flowing in and out of it' (DeWitt 2017:3).

world, 'baptising them in the name of the Father and of the Son and of the Holy Spirit' (Mt 28:19; cf. Mk 16:15–16). The book of Acts records many examples of the obedience to this command. In his sermon in Jerusalem on the Day of Pentecost, Peter urged his listeners, 'Repent, and let every one of you be baptised in the name of Jesus Christ ... and those who received his words were baptised' – about 3 000 persons (Ac 2:38–41). After the scattering of the church consequent upon persecution, Philip similarly preached in the region of Samaria, and many believed and were baptised (Ac 8:12). Philip also preached to the Ethiopian eunuch and baptised him (Ac 8:35–38). On hearing Paul's preaching at Corinth, many Corinthians believed and were baptised (Ac 18:8). Thus, after 'crucifixion, the followers of Jesus ... took up the baptism of John ... by which [many] Jews and pagans ... joined the new movement' (Zimmermann 2020:85).

Outside the canonical books, the *Didache* (also called the *Teaching of the Twelve*, written around 60–80 CE; amended in 100–150), contains information on baptism (DeWitt 2017:7). It indicates that, at the beginning of the 2nd century, 'there was already a need to regulate baptism in the growing church' (Zimmermann 2020:85). Mitchell (2014, cited in Zimmermann 2020) mentions that in 7:1–3, the *Didache* recommends:

[B]aptize ... in running water. But if you do not have running water, baptize in some other water. And if you cannot baptize in cold water, use warm. But if you have neither, pour water on the head three times in the name of Father and Son and Holy Spirit. But both the one baptizing and the one being baptized should fast before the baptism, along with some others if they can. But command the one being baptized to fast one or two days in advance. (p. 85)

Around 200 CE, Tertullian taught that the mode of baptism was not important. One could be 'baptised in the sea, a pond, a river, a spring, a lake, or a basin' (Zimmermann 2020:85). He also refers to a baptismal ritual in Carthage which included 'praying, fasting, confession of sins', amongst other things (Zimmermann 2020:85). Zimmermann (2020:86) opines that in the earliest Christian centuries, baptism was most likely conducted in living water 'in open or public water places or in private buildings in still water'. It was in the 4th century that baptisteries were introduced, wherein baptism was performed inside the church building 'and was no longer visible to outsiders' (Zimmermann 2020:86). Around this time in Jerusalem and Antioch, baptism had become a long process which lasted for several weeks and 'culminated in the baptismal act' (Zimmermann 2020:85). These early centuries also saw the introduction of 'infant baptism ... which remained unchallenged in the church until the Protestant Reformation' (DeWitt 2017:7). On the significance of baptism, Augustine (354–430) and his supporters taught that baptism was mandatory for salvation, seeing it as capable of 'forgiving sins' (DeWitt 2017:7). During the Reformation, Martin Luther (1483–1546) taught that baptism was a means 'through which God creates and strengthens saving faith' (DeWitt 2017:7). Salvation is by faith alone, but that faith comes in connection with baptism.

But the Swiss reformer, Huldrych Zwingli (1484–1531), disagreed with Luther. For Zwingli, baptism is 'a form of worship, not an occasion of receiving a blessing from God. ... [It is] an initiation ceremony ... [with no] saving value' (DeWitt 2017:8). The teaching that salvation cannot be separated from baptism, is decisively dealt in the next section under the significance of baptism from the NT perspective.

The significance of water baptism in the New Testament

Jurgensmeier (n.d.) rightly observes that in the NT 'baptism is to primarily symbolize a washing away of sins'. As already mentioned in the previous section, that was also the purpose of John's baptism. The Baptist had earlier pointed to Jesus as one greater than himself; one who would baptise with fire and the Holy Spirit (Lk 3:16). The followers of Jesus identified him as this stronger one (Jn 1:33; 3:22, 26; 4:1–2), and believed that 'the forgiveness of sins was made possible through' his death (Groenewald 2003:372; cf. Rm 4:24–25; 6:22–23; 1 Cor 15:3; 2 Cor 5:21). There was thus an intrinsic connection between baptism and 'the forgiveness of sins in the name of Jesus' (Theissen 1999:129). As noted by Jurgensmeier (n.d.), baptism became 'the biblical way in which people profess saving faith in Christ, [hence] water baptism is so closely tied to salvation in the NT'. This connection between baptism and salvation is shown copiously in the cases of baptism, particularly in the Acts of the Apostles with the phrases 'Repent and be baptised' (Ac 2:38; 22:16), and 'those who believed were baptised' (Ac 2:41; 8:12; 18:8). For the early believers, then, 'water baptism communicates complete and total forgiveness' (Jurgensmeier n.d.). It was the way of confessing faith in Jesus, but faith must be present for baptism to have meaning (Jurgensmeier n.d.).

The close connection between baptism and salvation as depicted in some texts, sometimes gives the impression that salvation is tied to baptism, that is, 'baptism saves people'; hence, there must be baptism for salvation to be complete (Jurgensmeier n.d.). Mark's version of the Great Commission seems to clearly depict the tying of salvation to baptism in that 'He who believes and is baptised will be saved' (Mk 16:16). On the Day of Pentecost, Peter said to the crowd that asked what to do to be saved:

Repent and ... be baptized in the name of Jesus Christ for the forgiveness of your sins; and you will receive the gift of the Holy Spirit. ... So then, those who [believed] were baptized and ... were added to the saved souls. (Ac 2:38–41)

Thus, repentance, baptism, the receiving of the Holy Spirit and being saved are all intrinsically connected. This impression can also be derived from the encounter between Philip and the Ethiopian eunuch in Acts 8. Having been convinced by Philip of the need to believe in Jesus, the eunuch declared, 'See, here is water! What is to prevent my being baptized?' (Ac 8:36; cf. 22:16). For both of Philip and the eunuch, baptism was 'the method for receiving Christ'. We can therefore conclude that for Peter and Philip, 'baptism was for salvation' (DeWitt 2017:5). This conclusion is

buttressed in 1 Peter 3:20–21 where ‘baptism saves ... as an appeal to God for a clear conscience’.

There is no doubting the fact that these references apparently ‘tie salvation and water baptism’ inextricably (Jurgensmeier n.d.). However, according to Jurgensmeier (n.d.), rather than baptism being a means of salvation, it is better to say that in the early church:

[W]ater baptism was the accepted means by which someone professed saving faith. ... [W]ater baptism is only a *symbolic demonstration* of God’s saving grace, and not necessarily an actual *means* of his saving grace.

This view is supported in some other texts, which attest that salvation is only by God’s grace. For instance, Jesus recognised the faith of the thief on the cross and promised him salvation, even when he could no longer be baptised (Lk 23:43). But some would contend that Jesus here contradicted his statement to Nicodemus that ... ‘unless one is born of water and the Spirit, he cannot enter the kingdom of God’ (Jn 3:5). Some are of the view that by being born of water, Jesus means water baptism, which would mean baptism is necessary for salvation. However, this interpretation is not likely correct in view of what follows in John 3:6 ‘That which is born of the flesh is flesh, and that which is born of the Spirit is spirit’. The phrase ‘born of flesh’ here is synonymous with ‘born of water’ in verse 5. Therefore, by *being born of water*, Jesus refers to ‘a person’s physical birth as a baby, not water baptism’ (Jurgensmeier n.d.). Paul similarly makes it clear that baptism is not mandatory for salvation when he says: ‘Christ did not send me to baptize but to preach the gospel’ (1 Cor 1:17). In Romans 1:16, Paul also excludes baptism or any other act as a means of salvation when he declares that the gospel is the power of God for salvation for those who have faith. DeWitt (2017:4) is therefore correct when he states that it is clear that in the NT ‘the means of salvation could not be baptism because there are many salvation passages which don’t mention it’ (e.g. Jn 1:12; 3:16; 5:24; Ac 16:31; Eph 2:8–9).

Through water baptism, the baptised is initiated into Christ (εἰς Χριστόν), which is truly the meaning of baptising ‘in the name of Christ’ (Zimmermann 2020:88). In this way, baptism assigned ‘the converts to Jesus as their new Lord’ (Zimmermann 2020:88), thereby making them members of the Christ community otherwise known as the family of God. As expressed by Jurgensmeier (n.d.), ‘water baptism is an outward symbolic expression of Spirit indwelling and being in the family of Christ believers (cf. Gl 3:26–27; 1 Cor 12:12–13)’. By means of baptism, the followers of Jesus ‘entered into a community that considered themselves the family of God’ (Zimmermann 2020:88). In the NT, baptism is also ‘a symbolical reference to [*believers*] participation in the death and resurrection of Jesus’ (Groenewald 2003:371). This ‘spiritual rebirth’ is what Paul terms as *baptism into Jesus* in Romans 6:2–4 (Jurgensmeier n.d.). Symbolically, through the physical act, all who are baptised into Christ are baptised into his death and buried with him so that ‘just as Christ was raised from the dead ... we too might walk in newness of

life’. In other words, through baptism believers died ‘with Christ, in order to be able to live a new life’ (Groenewald 2003:377).

Thus, in the NT, baptism serves primarily as a public attestation that those baptised, are believers in Christ. However, it must be pointed out that the NT also makes it clear that non-baptism does not change that status. In light of this conclusion, the following section examines the use of baptism as church membership identity in Nigeria.

Baptism as church membership identity in Nigeria

In Nigeria, water baptism was introduced along with Christianity by the early missionaries and as part of Western education. This meant that each denomination made baptism compulsory for all pupils in her schools. ‘Thus, baptism was regarded as a corollary of schooling’ (Turner 1967, cited in Komolafe 2016:49). This also means that each denomination has its own particular ‘understanding of the sacrament of baptism’ (Komolafe 2016:49). Hence, although most churches in Nigeria practise water baptism today, there are differences along denominational lines. The Reformed churches such as the Presbyterian and the Anglican Communion are amongst the earliest churches. They hold that baptism is a ‘symbol as well as seal of the covenant of grace’ by which the baptised enter the physical church (Ekpenyong & Ntamu 2014:155). The Redeemed Christian Church of God (RCCG) believes that churches must obey Jesus’ command on baptism:

When a person repents from his/her sin and believes Jesus died for him/her, before many witnesses, he/she is to be taken to water, immersed in it and brought up again. (RCCG 2011:5)

Baptism has to be in the name of the Father, the Son and the Holy Spirit as commanded in Matthew 28:19. According to Adedapo Sokan, Pastor of Christ Faith Tabernacle, Christians must follow the example of Jesus by ‘undergoing water baptism by immersion once in their lifetime’ (Uma & Abiaziem 2018). Baptism is an affirmation that one belongs ‘to the lineage of Christ’ (Uma & Abiaziem 2018).

The churches have their varied regulations and prescribed qualifications for baptism, usually contained in designed baptismal courses. The Anglican Communion and the Roman Catholic Church, however, have ‘a basic bond of unity [by which they] recognise the baptism each confers’ (Komolafe 2016:31). The RCCG states that its baptismal manual is ‘designed to teach and acquaint every prospective candidate for water baptism with the fundamental beliefs of the [*church*], as depicted in the Holy Bible’ (RCCG 2011:2). The duration of the baptismal course varies from one denomination to another, ranging from a few weeks to several months. They are all geared towards ensuring that candidates know the meaning and purpose of baptism. The most important qualification, according to the RCCG, is that candidates must be saved, but it emphasises that ‘Every saved soul automatically qualifies for water baptism’, citing Acts 8:29–39 and 16:28–33 (RCCG 2011:9). Writing on the

Pentecostal churches generally, Ekpenyong and Ntamu (2014:158) state that these churches believe that every individual candidate for baptism 'should show a clear understanding of the gospel message, as well as a dedicated faith in Christ, prior to being baptised'. Of course, in most churches baptism 'requires the full consent of an individual seeking the sacrament of baptism' (Komolafe 2016:52). It is perhaps for this reason that most of the Pentecostal churches do not practise infant baptism, as 'infants by themselves cannot confess their faith' (Komolafe 2016:48). In the Aladura churches³ particularly, baptism is conferred only on 'adults, ages eighteen and above, who are able to confess their faith' (Komolafe 2016:48). Their catechetical instruction for baptism usually includes essential Bible teachings such as important verses related to salvation, 'the Decalogue, the Creed, and the Lord's Prayer' (Turner 1967:189). In the Anglican church, baptism candidates 'are instructed to make a creedal statement of accepting Jesus Christ as Lord and Saviour' (Ekundayo 2016:34). They are also admonished to renounce all evil acts. Apart from the Catholic church and the Reformed group, usually the act of baptism itself is conducted by immersion in moving water, 'such as a flowing river or the sea' (Komolafe 2016:51). Until recently when some churches began to have some sort of baptisteries⁴ constructed in the church building, baptism was usually celebrated in the open, and not 'during the dry season when streams are dry' (Komolafe 2016:51).

More important for the purpose of this article, however, is the practice of employing baptism as membership identity in Nigerian churches. As seen in the previous section, in the NT the purpose of baptism is to openly attest that a baptised, person is a believer in Jesus, but baptism 'does not accomplish salvation, nor is it necessary for salvation' (DeWitt 2017:7). In Nigeria, most denominations treat baptism in some ways that suggest 'the conviction that water baptism is essential to someone's eternal salvation.' In other words, if someone is not baptised in water, the person is not yet a genuine Christian (Jurgensmeier n.d.). In his article on baptism, Ekundayo, an academic and Anglican pastor, gives the impression of the inseparability of salvation from baptism. He (2016) writes:

By baptism regeneration takes place and it makes the new convert [to] know the truth of the gospel. Baptism is a symbol of grace that makes someone fit to benefit from the sacrificial death, burial and resurrection of Jesus. The grace which makes salvation available is thus opened to the baptized person. The sins of the baptized persons are now being forgiven. (p. 36)

This pastor therefore simply holds that it is baptism that makes salvation available to the baptised. This attitude is further demonstrated in the fact that virtually all denominations make baptism 'an essential part of becoming a member of their specific church' (DeWitt 2017:7). For

3. In Yoruba language, *aladura* means 'one who prays'. 'Aladura Churches' refers to those ones well known for praying vibrantly and fervently. The term is usually used for the Cherubim and Seraphim Church (C&S), the Church of the Lord (Aladura), the Christ Apostolic Church (CAC), and the Celestial Church of Christ (CCC) (Komolafe 2016:39).

4. Some branches of the Evangelical Church Winning All (ECWA) in Ilorin, Kwara State, have receptacles underneath the church building meant to collect water for baptism.

example, in the Aladura churches baptism is 'the mode of entry into a particular church' wherein people are made to promise to abide by the rules and regulations of the church (Turner 1967:197). This is not to say that people cannot worship in these churches without being baptised. Komolafe (2016) explains that:

There is no haste or urgency in baptism, as people can become actively involved in church activities, and remain in the church for as long as they desire without any supposition that their position is irregular. There is an exception for this if someone wants to become a leader or an officer, meaning, no one can be appointed into a position of leadership in the [Aladura Churches] without being baptized. (p. 51)

This point is buttressed by the fact that, to date, already baptised people who join the C&S from other denominations, are made to re-baptise before they can hold any leadership position, especially if such persons cannot present their baptismal certificate.⁵ However, Pastor Praise of 'Joint-Heirs of Salvation Church' condemned this practice of making Christians to re-baptise (Uma & Abiazem 2018). As rightly pointed out by Turner (1967:197), this practice negates the purpose of baptism in the NT, where it is a mode of 'incorporation into the body of Christ [*i.e.*] the universal church'. This means that in the NT, baptism 'is not for local or institutional church membership' (DeWitt 2017:10). The World Council of Churches recognise re-baptism as a doctrinal error; hence, it recommends that baptism 'is not to be repeated, and any practice which might be interpreted as re-baptism must be avoided' (Komolafe 2016:33). This fact is indicated by Paul when he states that 'by one Spirit we were all baptised into one body, whether Jews or Greeks, whether slaves or free' (1 Cor 12:13 – the New King James Version [NKJV]). Moreover, if the intention of the church is to appoint genuine Christians into leadership positions, it then means that baptism is being treated as proof of salvation or holiness, which is not its original intention.

There are other practices which suggest baptism is being treated in Nigerian churches as evidence of salvation or holiness. From the early days of Anglican Communion in Africa, baptism has been used as the identity for full membership. In the early days when polygamy was a major issue in the church, if a baptised person became a polygamist, he 'has thereby automatically deprived himself of the rights and privileges of full membership of the Church' (Gitari 1984:5). The point being made here is that the punishment was due to the polygamist, because he was recognised as a member of the church by virtue of his being baptised. In other words, a non-baptised polygamist would simply be ignored, because he was not officially a member. This view is supported by the 1888 Lambeth resolutions, which 'have remained normative within the Anglican Communion ever since ... that persons living in polygamy be not admitted to baptism' (Gitari 1984, cited in Ademiluka 2020:3). In compliance with this resolution, in Nigeria the missionaries of the Church Missionary Society (CMS) resolved that 'no

5. Personal information: Evangelist (Mrs.) Olufemi Ademiluka, C&S No.4, Ilorin, Kwara State.

man could be admitted [*to baptism*] who retained more than one wife' (Muthengi 1995:72). To date, the Roman Catholic Church still holds the same official position that, if 'a man wishes to be baptised, he must put away all his wives except one [*and*] the additional wives of an unbaptised man cannot be baptised' (Hastings 1973, cited in Gitari 1984:5). In the Baptist Church, polygamists are still denied baptism and 'acceptance into the full membership⁶ of a local church' (Handan 2003:38). In view of the purpose of this article, the issue here is not the form of marriage, but the denial of baptism, and therefore church membership to people who have made a personal decision to believe in Jesus Christ. Denial of baptism and church membership in this way, runs contrary to the NT purpose of baptism, which is a public profession of belief in Jesus, and not necessarily a proof of holiness status. Another practice by which baptism is treated as evidence of holiness, is in making it a prerequisite for privileges, particularly 'participation in the Lord's Supper', as in the Baptist Church, for example (Handan 2003:38). Similarly, in the Lutheran Church, prior to taking part in the communion, 'members must meet the condition that they be baptized standing members of the church' (Bitrus 2016:300). Officially, in ECWA 'only those who are baptised could partake in the communion' (Cairns 1981, cited in Dadang 2020:21). In the Anglican Communion 'participation in Eucharist is based on baptism', amongst other rites (Ekundayo 2015:48). Also, in this church 'the only qualification for a church burial' is that the deceased must have been baptised while alive (Ekundayo 2016:33).

Thus, many Nigerian churches do not only make baptism their membership identity, but also treat it as the determinant of salvation and holiness status. But as already emphasised, this conception is contrary to the purpose of the sacrament in the NT. De Witt (2017) poses that the NT makes it clear that:

Water baptism must be distinguished from salvation. [*It*] is an ordinance whereby a believer expressed identification [*with Christ*]. Water baptism does not make people better, more spiritual, or closer to God. (pp. 9, 10)

Commenting on Ephesians 2:8–9, Jurgensmeier (n.d.) states that baptism or any act for that matter 'can have absolutely nothing to do with our righteous standing before God'. This position is proven from the fact that there are 'those who truly belong to Christ who have never been baptized; and there are many who are baptized who by no means come to saving faith' (Ekpenyong & Ntamu 2014:156).

Conclusion

The purpose of John's baptism was for the forgiveness of sins. The Baptist pointed to someone stronger than him who would come after him and baptise people with fire and Spirit instead of water. Jesus' disciples recognised him as that mightier one, and whose death was for the remission of sins. Baptism then became a means of public confession of Jesus as

⁶Persons without full membership 'are free to attend church regularly but without membership privileges and they cannot be elected into a place of leadership' (Handan 2003:38).

one's Lord. Thus, a seemingly intrinsic connection developed between baptism and the forgiveness of sins in the name of Jesus. Several passages in the gospels and the book of Acts give this impression that salvation is tied to baptism, that is, that salvation is incomplete without baptism. But at the same time, many NT passages decisively state that salvation is purely by God's grace, not by works; and this has since been the generally accepted position in Christianity. However, in Nigeria there are church practices which suggest the conviction that water baptism is essential for salvation. This attitude is demonstrated in the fact that individual denominations make baptism their membership identity; so much that persons moving from one denomination to another must sometimes be rebaptised in their new churches. Some practices suggest that baptism is being treated as proof of salvation and holiness. For instance, in some churches polygamists are denied baptism and therefore acceptance into full membership. Baptism is also treated as a mark of holiness by making it a prerequisite for privileges, particularly participation in the Lord's Supper. These practices contradict the purpose of baptism in the NT, which is just a way of a believer expressing identification with Christ, and the universal church as Christ's body. In other words, baptism was never intended as membership identity of local church groups. Common experience has shown that baptism cannot be proof of holiness, because there are committed Christians who are not baptised, just as there are baptised persons whose lives do not exhibit holiness. If there is need for membership identity, there are identity-marker methods other than baptism which Nigerian churches can adopt, such as printing identity cards for members. Since baptism is not an indication of holiness, appointment of leaders in the church is better based on character than on baptism.

Acknowledgements

Competing interests

The author declares that he has no financial or personal relationships that may have inappropriately influenced him in writing this article.

Author's contributions

S.A. is the sole author of this article.

Ethical considerations

This article followed all ethical standards for research without direct contact with human or animal subjects.

Funding information

This research received no specific grant from any funding agency in the public, commercial or not-for-profit sectors.

Data availability

Data sharing is not applicable to this article, as no new data were created or analysed in this study.

Disclaimer

The views and opinions expressed in this article are those of the author and do not necessarily reflect the official policy or position of any affiliated agency of the author.

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