



SACRAMENT OF BAPTISM IN THE EARLY CHURCH AND INDIGENOUS PENTECOSTAL CHURCHES IN NIGERIA: CONTINUITY AND CULTURAL ADAPTATION

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Abstract

Baptism has remained a defining ritual within Christianity, symbolizing initiation, purification, and participation in the salvific work of Christ. While extensive scholarship has examined baptismal theology in the Early Church, limited attention has been given to its expression within indigenous Pentecostal churches in Nigeria. This article undertakes a comparative historical and cultural analysis of baptism in the Early Church and in three Nigerian indigenous Pentecostal denominations: the Christ Apostolic Church (CAC), the Celestial Church of Christ (CCC), and the Cherubim and Seraphim Church (C&S). Drawing on patristic sources, doctrinal materials, field observations, and survey data, the study identifies both theological continuity and contextual transformation. Core elements such as immersion, repentance, and Trinitarian invocation persist, while ritual symbolism and administrative structures have been reshaped by contemporary ecclesiastical and cultural realities. The findings illustrate how early Christian traditions are preserved and reinterpreted within African Pentecostal contexts, contributing to broader discussions on religious transmission, adaptation, and identity in global Christianity.

Keywords: Baptism, Early Christianity, Indigenous Pentecostalism, African Christianity, Ritual Adaptation, Comparative Theology

Introduction

Baptism has occupied a central position in Christian life since the time of Jesus and the apostolic Church. As a ritual of initiation, it signifies repentance, spiritual cleansing, incorporation into the Christian community, and participation in the salvific work of Christ. While ritual washing and purification were common in ancient civilizations—including Egypt, Persia, and the Greco-Roman world—Christian baptism emerged with distinctive theological significance, uniquely tied to Christ's death and resurrection and the reception of the Holy Spirit.

In the Early Church, baptism was not merely symbolic but transformative, functioning as the gateway into spiritual life and the Christian community. Over time, its theological interpretation evolved, including debates about infant versus adult



baptism, immersion versus affusion, and the sacramental versus symbolic understanding of the rite.

Despite extensive historical scholarship on Early Church baptism, contemporary expressions within indigenous Pentecostal churches in Nigeria have received comparatively limited academic attention. Nigerian Pentecostalism is characterized by dynamic cultural adaptation, blending biblical Christianity with African ritual sensibilities, moral frameworks, and community structures. The Christ Apostolic Church (CAC), Celestial Church of Christ (CCC), and Cherubim and Seraphim Church (C&S) provide illustrative cases of how baptism is practiced, interpreted, and culturally mediated.

This study examines baptism in these Nigerian Pentecostal contexts in comparison with the Early Church, seeking to answer the following questions:

To what extent do contemporary Nigerian Pentecostal churches preserve the theology and practice of baptism as observed in the Early Church?

How have cultural and contextual factors shaped the administration and ritual of baptism in these churches?

What similarities and divergences exist between early and contemporary practices, and what do these reveal about religious continuity and adaptation?

By situating Nigerian Pentecostal baptism within a historical-theological and cultural framework, this study contributes to discussions on religious identity, ritual adaptation, and the transmission of Christian traditions across time and space.

2.1 Baptism in the Early Church

Baptism in the Early Church was central to Christian identity. Scholars such as Berkhof (2000), Fatokun (2011), and Arulefela (1990) emphasize its theological significance as both a rite of initiation and a means of spiritual regeneration. Patristic writings, including Tertullian, Origen, Augustine, and the Didache, describe baptism as encompassing repentance, confession of faith, and moral preparation.

The Early Church practiced adult baptism as normative, while infant baptism emerged later, informed by debates on original sin. Immersion in flowing water was the preferred mode, though affusion was allowed in exceptional circumstances, such as



illness or emergency. Symbolic elements such as white garments, anointing with oil, the lighting of candles, and even consumption of milk and honey conveyed the theological meaning of purification, enlightenment, and spiritual nourishment (Fatokun, 2011).

2.2 Baptism in Indigenous Nigerian Pentecostalism

Indigenous Pentecostal churches in Nigeria—CAC, CCC, and C&S—represent the convergence of biblical Christianity and African cultural sensibilities. Baptism is a central sacrament across these churches, marking initiation into the Christian community, spiritual rebirth, and moral commitment.

Christ Apostolic Church (CAC): Practices believer's baptism by immersion. Candidates, generally aged twelve and above, undergo several weeks of doctrinal instruction and confession of faith. Baptism is administered by ordained ministers using the Trinitarian formula, and it is required for full church membership (Alokan, 2010).

Celestial Church of Christ (CCC): Requires extensive preparation of twelve months, including instruction, repentance, and moral discipline. Baptism is conducted by immersion in flowing water and symbolizes spiritual cleansing, rebirth, and readiness for Holy Communion (Michael, 2013).

Cherubim and Seraphim Church (C&S): Follows a similar model, with preparatory instruction and public profession of faith. Baptism is conducted by immersion in the Trinitarian name for candidates aged twelve and above, blending Christian theological meaning with African ritual expressions (Omoyajowo, 1982; Fakeye, 2000).

These churches maintain immersion and the Trinitarian formula, reject infant baptism, and emphasize personal conversion experience and obedience to Christ. Ritual complexity varies, with CAC preferring simpler rites and CCC/C&S incorporating additional ceremonial elements.

2.3 Comparative Perspectives

Comparative scholarship emphasizes that Christian rituals are historically transmitted but contextually adapted. Ferguson (2009) notes that baptism in early Christianity carried theological, communal, and eschatological dimensions, which contemporary



churches may simplify for practical and cultural reasons. In Nigerian Pentecostalism, adaptation reflects African cultural norms, institutional priorities, and practical concerns of congregational administration. This study builds on such scholarship by situating empirical observations within historical-theological analysis.

3. Methodology

A qualitative-dominant mixed-methods approach was adopted. Historical-theological analysis examined patristic texts, biblical commentary, and church doctrinal materials. Fieldwork included participant observation and questionnaires administered to 150 respondents across CAC, CCC, and C&S, yielding 138 valid responses. Observations focused on baptismal ceremonies, preparatory instruction, and ritual symbolism.

Data were analyzed using thematic content analysis, identifying continuities and divergences between Early Church practices and contemporary Pentecostal expressions. Quantitative data from surveys were used to support qualitative findings, providing percentages and trends in practice and beliefs.

Ethical considerations included informed consent from participants and respect for doctrinal confidentiality.

4. Baptism in the Early Church

Baptism was the essential rite of entry into Christian life. Catechumens underwent systematic instruction in Christian doctrine, repentance, and moral discipline, often lasting several months. Ritual elements included:

Immersion: Triple immersion in water in the name of the Father, Son, and Holy Spirit, with affusion permitted in emergencies.

Anointing and White Garments: Represented purification and spiritual enlightenment.

Candles and Milk/Honey: Symbolized illumination and spiritual nourishment.

Public Confession: Demonstrated commitment and incorporation into the Christian community.

Adult baptism predominated, though infant baptism emerged later. Administration initially allowed by any believer became reserved for ordained clergy over time.



Baptism combined spiritual, communal, and eschatological meanings, serving as both a sacramental and transformative act.

5. Baptism in Nigerian Indigenous Pentecostal Churches

5.1 Christ Apostolic Church (CAC)

Believer's baptism by immersion.

Minimum age: 12 years.

Doctrinal instruction: 3–4 weeks.

Administered by ordained ministers.

Emphasis: personal faith, repentance, and obedience to Christ.

5.2 Celestial Church of Christ (CCC)

Believer's baptism by immersion in flowing water.

Minimum age: 16 years.

Preparatory instruction: 12 months.

Emphasis: moral discipline, spiritual readiness, and rebirth.

5.3 Cherubim and Seraphim Church (C&S)

Believer's baptism by immersion.

Minimum age: 12 years.

Preparatory instruction and public confession of faith.

Integration of African ritual symbolism within Christian framework.

Survey data show high adherence to immersion and the Trinitarian formula (95–98% respondents). Infant baptism is largely rejected (88–92%). Ritual elements such as white garments and anointing are more prevalent in CCC and C&S than CAC.

6. Comparative Analysis



Aspect.	Early Church.	CAC.	CCC.
C&S			
Theology	Repentance, rebirth, incorporation into Christ	Same	Same.
Mode.	Immersion (affusion optional).	Immersion	immersion
Age	Adults (infant baptism later).	12.	16.
Preparation	Catechesis, Fasting, and moral scrutiny.	3-4 weeks	12 months
Ritual Symbolism	oil, white garments, candles, milk/honey.	Minimal	White garment W/garment

Observations:

Strong theological continuity: repentance, spiritual rebirth, Trinitarian formula.

Contextual adaptations: simplification of symbolic rituals, administrative efficiency.

Cultural adaptation: African ritual expressions integrated in C&S and CCC.

7. Discussion

Baptism in Nigerian Pentecostalism reflects a dynamic interplay between theological fidelity and cultural contextualization. While Early Church baptism was rich in symbolic ritual, Nigerian churches prioritize doctrinal instruction and personal conversion, reflecting modern ecclesial structures and African cultural priorities. This adaptation ensures the practice remains meaningful, comprehensible, and spiritually relevant.

The study highlights how African Pentecostal churches maintain core Christian theology while creatively interpreting ritual elements for local communities, contributing to global discussions on religious adaptation and continuity.

8. Conclusion



Baptism remains a central sacrament in Christianity, preserving its theological essence across historical and cultural contexts. CAC, CCC, and C&S demonstrate continuity with Early Church traditions in immersion, Trinitarian invocation, and spiritual significance.

However, ritual symbolism is simplified, and procedural adaptations reflect cultural, practical, and institutional realities. Reintegrating certain symbolic elements could deepen the spiritual and theological impact of baptism.

Overall, the study illustrates the enduring relevance of Early Church practices while highlighting the adaptive strategies of African Pentecostalism in sustaining religious identity and community cohesion.

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