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OGBOMOSO, NIGERIA**

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**THE SIGNIFICANCE OF BAPTISM FROM AN  
EVANGELICAL CHRISTIAN PERSPECTIVE**

**AN ESSAY SUBMITTED TO THE FACULTY OF  
THEOLOGICAL STUDIES IN CANDIDACY FOR THE  
DEGREE OF MASTER OF DIVINITY**

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**JUNE 2005**

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## **ABSTRACT**

Baptism is one of the commands of Jesus Christ to his followers before his ascension. Among other things in Matthew 28:19-20, the disciples were commanded to baptize other disciples from all the nations in the name of God the Father, Son, and Holy Spirit.

The command in itself seems simple and straight-forward but has become problematic in mode and administration. While some claim that it could be done only by immersion, others say it ought to be by pouring while others still say it should be by sprinkling. In matters of administration, some will administer it only unto those who personally and publicly confess their faith in Jesus Christ as Saviour and Lord. Whereas, some will extend the gesture to children who may have to make their confession of faith at a later date.

Baptism means several things to several people. To some it is a means of initiation, incorporation, adoption, washing (spiritual bath), sealing, or a unifying factor. However, the evangelicals emphasize the symbolic significance of baptism. To the evangelicals especially the Baptists, baptism is an ordinance and not a sacrament. Baptism symbolizes the death, burial and resurrection of Jesus Christ.

The waters of baptism that should have been a unifying element in most respects have been waters that divide. Attempts should be made to drop all human sentiment and go back to the scriptures like the evangelicals to truly understand the mode, candidature and significance of baptism.

## CONCLUSION

Baptism has been traced from its historical origin to biblical concept and conflicting views from one Christian group to the other. The focus of this paper remains the evangelical perspective of its significance.

A further clarification is however necessary at this point as to which particular evangelical group this paper will be pitching its tent with. As mentioned in the body of the paper, an evangelical is known by the place he gives to the authority of the Scriptures over and above any human or council authority. The Gospels are held in high esteem in matters of doctrinal teaching as personal profession of faith in the Saviour and Lord Jesus Christ is a prerequisite to membership in the fellowship of the believers. Up until this point, the evangelicals are united.

An evangelical must demonstrate personal conversion; such an individual must have the conviction that salvation comes only through faith; he must hold the belief that the blood of Jesus Christ shed on the cross atone for his sins; he must hold the authority of the scriptures in high esteem. Such may belong to the protestant conviction for people has been Christian before the Reformation that gave birth to the Protestant churches. Working definition of

evangelical will therefore be a Bible believing Christian, who upholds evangelical doctrines and may be or may not be a member of an evangelical sect or part. This definition is so because there was a time in England when anyone who does not belong to the Church of England was considered evangelical or member of "the low church party of the church of England."<sup>1</sup> There was a time when the group so referred were found all over Europe and America. By 1946, they saw the need to form an 'Evangelical Alliance' which will be an international Pentecostal association. It became the first association towards the expression of church unity which is today called ecumenical movement.<sup>2</sup> As expected those who joined the alliance then were mostly Anglicans in other lands and Episcopalians as they are called in America.

In Nigeria also, the church is divided along Catholic, Evangelicals, Pentecostals and Indigenous African Churches otherwise called Aladuras. The word evangelical therefore covers the mainline churches such as Anglican, Methodist and Baptist. It might still be necessary to narrow down on "evangelical" when talking about baptism. When evangelicals in general shall be referred to in this paper, the Baptists shall be focused in particular.

The concept of baptism as it shall be explained in this paper is not an easy concept. Just as the church is divided on any major

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<sup>1</sup> Collins, 534.

<sup>2</sup> World Book Encyclopedia.

doctrinal teaching so also is she divided on the subject of baptism. For instance, the centrality of the doctrine of Trinity to biblical Christianity does not prevent it from being problematic. In an attempt for the early Christians not to lose their Jewish monotheism while exalting their Saviour, their efforts to explain the Christian God without becoming tritheists produced a lot of heresies. Increased persecution and heresy forced Christian writers to state more precisely and to defend the biblical teaching concerning God the Father, Son, and Holy Spirit which culminated in what was called 'Arian heresy' that denied the deity of Christ. The battle line was then drawn between Arius and Athanasius before the Nicea A. D. 325 Council formally condemned Arianism even though did little to the development of the doctrine of the Holy Spirit.<sup>3</sup>

It must be understood that the word 'Trinity' is never used, nor is the doctrine of Trinitarianism ever explicitly taught in the scriptures. The study of the doctrine is therefore an exercise in putting together biblical themes and data through a systematic theological study. If that assumption is accepted, then, a good care must be taken so as not to find oneself fighting against God instead of for Him.

Speaking in tongues is another doctrinal issue where the church is distinctly divided into three: traditional, Pentecostal, and charismatic. There was a joint effort in fighting the totalitarianism of

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<sup>3</sup> H. Wayne House, Charts of Christian Theology and Doctrine, Grand Rapids: Zondervan Publishing House, 1992, 43 – 44.

the papacy. The group among whom we have Baptists, Lutherans, Zwinglians and Calvinists also strive to recover the spirituality of the church. However, within themselves they were further divided over 'general' or 'limited' atonement.<sup>4</sup>

The crisis of the church did not spare baptism. Apart from mode of baptism, the church can be seen to be broadly divided into two: infant baptism versus believers' baptism. This paper will pitch its tent with the adherents of believers' baptism for it is the evangelical understanding of baptism. However, evangelicals are not united when it comes to who should be the candidates for baptism and the proper mode for it. It must be noted that even Martin Luther, the father of Reformation saw nothing wrong in infant baptism and sprinkling as a mode. Until today, infant baptism is still being practiced in most Lutheran churches. Because of that, this paper shall express the Baptist position among the evangelicals; as earlier mentioned in the limitation to the work.

Baptists as evangelicals see baptism first and foremost as an ordinance. It is not a sacrament. As an ordinance, it becomes appropriate to view it as "a rule, law or command which Christians are expected to carry out in an act which can be observed."<sup>5</sup> As an

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<sup>4</sup> Robert G. Torbet, A History of the Baptists, London: The Carey Kings gate Press Limited, 1966, 22.

<sup>5</sup> J.A. Ojo, Class Note on Baptist Doctrine, Nigerian Baptist Theological Seminary, Ogbomoso, 2003.

