

**Baptism, Church Attendance And Their Economy of Salvation In African Christianity:
Covenantal Fidelity As Panacea**

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Abstract

Statistics show that Christianity has moved from the global north to the global south. Some statistics show that about 85% of Kenya's population is Christian, yet, observably, not all people with baptismal names attend Church regularly. Many have understood baptism as salvific in itself and thereby not needing to continue with Church worship after they are baptized. Research shows that most people after they are baptized, they become nominal Christians, only attending Church services on special occasions while others abandon church attendance all together. Baptism is understood to be the sacrament of salvation, Acts 2:37. Thus it has been understood as a rite of entry into membership of the Church. Therefore, this article poses the question: Is baptism sufficient for one's salvation and does one need to maintain church attendance to retain their salvation? To respond to these questions, this article explains the meaning of baptism, the place of baptism in salvation, the significance of church attendance in relationship to endurance of salvation and shows how people's culture could help in their understanding of baptism and its economy in salvation. The hypothesis of this article is that if baptism and its economy of salvation is explained in the light of African covenantal fidelity to African Christian converts, they would understand it and this would solve the problem of Church apathy.

Keywords: Baptism, Economy of Salvation, Covenantal Fidelity, Church Apathy.

Introduction

Despite statistics showing that Christianity is moving from the global north to the global south with Kenya posting 85% of its population being Christians, the same statistics show that this numbers are not reflected in the regular attendance of Church. There is great apathy towards church attendance. Many African Christians having understood the sacrament of baptism as a rite of entry into salvation, they do not see the need to continue with Church attendance once they have been initiated into the salvation.

This article attempts to elucidate the place of baptism in the Christian's salvation and the role of Church attendance in one's retention of that salvation. To achieve this, the article poses guiding questions: Is baptism sufficient for one's salvation? Would one lose their salvation if they ceased attending Church? How do we address the attitude of apathy to church attendance? In this article we propose that if African *covenantal fidelity* is used as *lumen sub quo* into baptism as a divine mystery, the relapsing Christian will understand the relationship between baptism and continual attendance of Church in their salvation.

The article begins with a brief definition of sacraments in general and then embarks on the surveys of the historical development of the notion of the sacrament of baptism and its significance in the history of the Church.

1. Conception of Baptism, Church Attendance and their Economy of Salvation

According to the Kenya National Bureau of Statistics (KNBS) of 2019 census report, there are 9,726,169 Catholics, 15,777, 473 Protestants and 9,648,690 Evangelicals plus more others subscribing to other denominations. This constitutes about 85% of the nation's population subscribing to Christianity.¹ However, statistics based on self-reporting surveys on regular Church attendance notes that this is not reflected in the actual statistics of those who attended Church regularly.² There are more people baptized with "Christian names" and who claim to be Christians than those who actually attend Church regularly.

¹(<https://www.pulselive.co.ke/news/2019-census-report-shows-christianity-dominant-religion-in-kenya-reveals-how-kenyans/e4911h4>)

² It was difficult to establish actual regular church attendance in Kenya because even the attendance statistics was based on self-reporting statistics.

This trend presents us with a host of questions: What do such group of people think baptism is? Is one saved once they are baptized? Is baptism for them sufficient for salvation? Does one remain a full member of a church by virtue of baptism? Does maintaining one's membership of a Church by virtue of baptism guarantee one's salvation? Do they think baptism confers salvation on the one baptized and therefore, once baptized always saved? Therefore, this articles concentrates on two questions: *is baptism sufficient for salvation? Is church attendance necessary for one's retention of their salvation?*

In a research carried out on the question of assurance of salvation, a respondent of Roman Catholic faith said she believed she is saved "because Jesus died on the cross for the salvation of humankind...and through the sacrament of baptism we receive the promise of the Spirit through faith (Gal. 3:14)..."³

This response drove the researcher into more interviews with Christians in Protestant Churches to find out their position about Church attendance and salvation. The research was carried out among alcoholics in Kabuku area of Limuru Sub-County. The question was, now that you don't attend Church, would you be saved if Jesus returned now? One of the interviewees responded that he is saved because his Presbyterian Church taught that once justified, one cannot lose their salvation and since he confessed his sins before he was confirmed as an adult believer, he believes he is saved.

One of the interviewees known for heavy smoking and working at his carpenter shop throughout the week, asked the same question responded that, he was baptized in the Presbyterian Church but he no longer attended church. He added that however, he considered himself a Christian and saved by virtue of the fact that he was a baptized Christian.

Another interviewee of Roman Catholic tradition⁴ did not remember when he last attended Church service although his family (wife and children) went to Church regularly. Asked if he would be saved if Jesus returned now, he quipped and said, but when Jesus comes, he shall be saved because he is a baptized Catholic and he believes that by virtue of having been baptized, his past, present and future sins were washed away by the blood of Jesus.

³ John, Michael Kiboi. *Election & Reprobation: Christian Quest for Certainty of Salvation*, (Nairobi: Jakochimbo Press; 2022), 109..

⁴ The interviewee hails from Trans-Nzoia County.

In another interview away from Kabuku, the researcher meets a Seventh Day Adventist (SDA). This man had earlier lost the first set of his children. Driven by anxiety and fear of dying without a child he had resorted to marrying many wives which was against the teachings of his church. Despite the relapse, this interviewee still attended Church every Sabbath; asked if he still considered himself fully a member of his church and whether he would be saved when Jesus returned, he replied that he still considered himself a full member of the SDA church by virtue of his first baptism although he had been barred from participating in the Lord's Table unless he divorced the extra women.

The question whether baptism and Church attendance were related to salvation, or each individually was sufficient for one's salvation, led the researcher to reflect deeply about baptism and economy of salvation in the context of Corona-virus pandemic social restrictions. The researcher posed a question on one of his Church social media platforms, a group called "*Ecclesia Anglicana*". This group is composed of Anglican bishops, clergy and laity. In the group there are also members who converted from Roman Catholicism; in fact some had trained and been ordained as Catholic priests. Anglican Church teaches and practices infant baptism as a means of remission of original sin.⁵ It also upholds baptism as a rite of entry into the Church and it is in the church that grace (salvation) is received through sacraments. The researcher posed the questions: Would someone who has been validly baptized lose their salvation if they did not attend Church? Would their baptism suffice for their salvation? There were many responses, but the following will suffice for our discussion. One respondent (who will go by her first name only- Margaret) observed that we have to differentiate between salvation and baptism. She went on to state that someone who has received Jesus as their personal saviour and has been validly baptized cannot lose their salvation even if they didn't attend church because our hearts are the temples of the Spirit. This respondent went ahead to clarify that baptism was not salvation, baptism symbolized that someone had died with Jesus and had also resurrected with him.

Another respondent who goes by the social media identity as Kip' & Rachel Chelashaw responding on the question of whether one who did not attend church had lost their salvation, said, "If one is staying away from church for unwarranted reasons then it might be an indicator

⁵ St. Augustine had taught that humans were conceived in sin (Psalm 51) and therefore, every one of them was imprinted with Adamic sin at conception. This led the church in the main teach that Baptism removed this so called inherited sin.

of their rebellion and lack of salvation.” This respondent went on to state that for example if someone stopped attending Church because they were lost into sinful acts, then they were outside Christ i.e. not saved given passages like 1 Corinthians 6:9. The respondent went on to say, “No believer simply stays at home when they could be at church and it runs counter to passages like Hebrews 10:25.”

A follow-up question was whether they had encountered someone who did not go to church, bears a Christian name and when asked why they did not go to church, and whether they considered themselves still saved, they said they were still saved even though they did not attend church? The response from Kip’ & Chelashwa was that they encountered some and majority of them tended to be youth. He/she said, these youth “rarely connect the two (baptism and salvation) though there have been occasions where when people are challenged and called to recommit to gathering with God’s people (church), they responded that it wasn’t a big deal and anyway they have been baptized.”

The foregoing interviews and responses present us with the questions: What exactly is baptism and does it confer salvation on the participant? Does the state of the participant matter? And what is the place of church attendance in the economy of salvation? In order for us to address these concerns, we shall attempt to explain the meaning, origin and development of this sacrament and the place of Church attendance in the economy of salvation.

2.0 Baptism and Economy of Salvation

St. Augustine defined sacraments as “a sign of something sacred, the visible symbol of an invisible grace.”⁶ This definition seems to be universally accepted especially by both the Catholics and the Evangelical Christians. In the Lutheran and Anglican catechisms it is defined as “an outward and visible sign of an inward and spiritual grace.”⁷ From the two definitions, it is clear that the Catholics, Evangelicals, Anglicans and Lutherans are in agreement on what sacraments are yet they don’t agree on especially its inherent virtue. Many contemporary theologians have followed in the footsteps of St. Augustine in defining sacraments. For example R.C. Sproul defines Sacraments as “visible signs by which God offers His promise of grace in an

⁶ <https://www.britannica.com/topic/sacrament>

⁷ Ibid.

outward form.”⁸ This outward sign seals and confirms the covenant promises of God. These means of grace called sacraments are also known as divine mysteries. Christians believe that “sacraments are real means of grace that convey the promises of God.”⁹

Since our concern is on the sacrament of baptism, we need to define it. The word baptism is derived from a Greek word, baptizo (βαπτίζω) which literally means to “dip” or to “immerse”. It is an “outward act that symbolizes the inward phenomenon of coming to and accepting Jesus Christ as real, as God incarnate, as the sacrificial means by which those who believe in him can be forever reconciled to God... It is the first step of discipleship (Acts 8:26-39).”¹⁰

Baptism has always been assumed as the sacrament of salvation e.g. in Peter’s Pentecost speech, the listeners who were touched by his message asked, ‘what must we do to be saved?’ His reply was emphatic: ‘repent and be baptized’ (Acts 2:36-39).

In the later years of the Church (medieval period), Thomas Aquinas taught that sacraments as a whole (especially baptism and Eucharist) were necessary signs of divine grace (God’s help to mortal humanity). They were necessary spiritual medicine to diseased men. This background may have given rise to the Roman Catholic teaching of the automatic efficacy of the Eucharist i.e. it worked *ex opere operato*, which means ‘in virtue of the sacramental act itself, and not in virtue of the acts or disposition of the recipient, or of the worthiness of the minister (*ex opera operantis*).’¹¹ This also implies that the sacraments impart God’s grace on the recipient regardless of the moral status of such recipient.

The Catholic Church and the Evangelicals are divided on the question of the inherent virtues in sacraments. Therefore, before we embark on discussing whether baptism confers salvation to the participant, let us investigate the position of the two Church traditions: Catholic and Evangelicals.

⁸ R. C. Sproul (Gen. Ed), *The Reformation Study Bible*, commentary on sacraments

⁹ Ibid.

¹⁰ <https://www.crosswalk.com/faith/spiritual-life/baptism-what-is-it-meaning-and-definition.html#0>

¹¹ Francis, J. Paul. *Romanism and Evangelical Christianity: A Study of Origins and Development*, Belfast: Christian Irishman, (n.d):20.

2.1 Baptism and Economy of Salvation in the Catholic Church

For us to understand the position of the Catholic Church on Baptism and its economy of salvation, we shall study the teachings of the Council of Trent (1545-1563). At this Council, the Council Fathers in essence were disputing the Reformers' notion of the various doctrines and formulating what would henceforth be the Church's position on the interpretation of the doctrines. In its opening remarks on sacraments in general, the Council fathers declared that "through the most holy sacraments of the church all true righteousness either begins, or having begun is increased, or having been lost, is repaired."¹² Still on the significance of sacraments, the Council fathers declared in Canon 4 the necessity of sacraments for our salvation. It states: "If anyone says that the sacraments of the new law are not necessary for salvation but are superfluous, and that without them or without the desire of them, men obtain from God through faith alone the grace of justification, though all are not necessary for each one, let him be anathema."¹³

In Canon 6, the Council Fathers taught that "sacraments contain the grace which they signify; they confer this grace on those who do not present an obstacle thereto."¹⁴ And in Canon 7 the Council Fathers declared that, "If anyone says that grace, so far as God's part is concerned, is not imparted through the sacraments always and to all men even if they receive them rightly, but only sometimes and to some persons, let him be anathema."¹⁵ Canon 8 declares the efficacy of the sacrament regardless of the status of the celebrant. It states, "If anyone says that in the sacraments of the new law grace is not conferred *ex opere operato*, but, that faith alone in the divine promise is sufficient to obtain grace, let him be anathema."¹⁶

Although the Roman Church taught that the sacraments contained virtue in themselves i.e. "the sacrament is effective because of its inherent power,"¹⁷ especially when properly administered

¹² Paul. 20. Also confer, Denis R. Janz, (ed). *A Reformation Reader: Primary Texts with Introduction*, (Minneapolis, Fortress Press 1999), 358.

¹³ Denis R. Janz, (ed). *A Reformation Reader: Primary Texts with Introduction*, (Minneapolis, Fortress Press 1999), 359.

¹⁴ Paul, *Romanism and Evangelical Christianity*, p. 20 and Janz, *A Reformation Reader* p. 359.

¹⁵ Janz, *A Reformation Reader* p. 359.

¹⁶ Ibid.

¹⁷ Paul. *Romanism and Evangelical Christianity*, p. 22.

by the priest¹⁸, it transmitted supernatural grace; they noted that this was only possible if the recipient did not place an obstacle in its way. In effect, this means that since infants cannot place obstacle to the sacrament of baptism, baptism is always effective in their case.

2.2 Baptism and Economy of Salvation among the Evangelicals

Whereas the Roman Catholic Church teaches that the sacraments have inherent virtue or power within themselves and could work *ex opere operato* or even *ex opere operantis*, the Evangelicals on their part held that “the two sacraments have no virtue in themselves; their virtue depends on the faith of the recipient, as he/she apprehends Christ.”¹⁹ In the Shorter Catechism, it is stated, “the sacraments become effectual means of salvation, not from any virtue in them or in him that do administer them, but only by the blessing of Christ and the working of His Holy Spirit in them that by faith receive them.”²⁰ Thus, the Evangelicals insist that “sacraments are aids to faith; they cannot take the place of faith.”²¹ To bolster this position, The Heidelberg Catechism on Sacraments asks, “It is by faith alone that we share in Christ and all his blessings: where then does that faith come from?”²² The response to this question states, “The Holy Spirit produces in our hearts by the preaching of the holy gospel, and confirms it through our use of the holy sacraments.”²³

According to the Reformers, sacraments do not confer salvation on their own, but they are means of grace that makes the gospel promises real in the life of the believer. Main stream reformers rejected the *ex-opere operato* view of the working of the sacraments. They held that a sacrament is important for salvation not because it imparts salvation but because it acts on the faith of the recipient. In most of these traditions, it is held that sacraments aid or strengthen faith. It is also held that: “non-believers may receive the external elements, but do not receive the grace

¹⁸ According to the the Roman Catholic Church, the validity of the sacrament depends on the right intention of the celebrating priest and his correct application of the prescribed formula. If the priest, although well intending, omits part of the prescribed formula, the sacrament is invalid.

¹⁹ Paul. *Romanism and Evangelical Christianity*, p. 22.

²⁰ Quoted in Paul. *Romanism and Evangelical Christianity*, p. 22-23.

²¹ Paul. *Romanism and Evangelical Christianity*, p. 23.

²² *Heidelberg Catechism*, Lord’s Day 25 on Sacraments, Question 65.

²³ *Ibid*.

signified thereby.”²⁴ In their definition of the sacraments and explanation of their purpose, they state;

Sacraments are holy signs and seals for us to see. They were instituted by God so that by our use of them he might make us understand more clearly the promise of the gospel, and might put his seal on that promise. And this is God’s gospel promise: to forgive our sins and give us eternal life by grace alone because of Christ’s one sacrifice finished on the cross.²⁵

It is clear from this teaching that unlike the Roman Church, the Reformers do not teach the inherent efficacy of the sacraments and conferring of salvation by them in themselves. This is made clear that salvation is only gotten by focusing our gaze on Christ’s sacrifice on the cross. It teaches that

...both the word and the sacraments are intended to focus our faith on the sacrifice of Jesus Christ on the cross as the only ground of our salvation...; that in the gospel the Holy Spirit teaches us and through the holy sacraments he assures us that our entire salvation rests on Christ’s one sacrifice for us on the cross.²⁶

Whereas the Catholic Church takes serious the intention of the priest to perform the sacrament and his correct application of the formula, for the efficacy of the sacrament, “in Evangelical Christianity the efficiency of the sacrament does not depend on the exact words used by the ministrant but upon the active faith of the recipient.”²⁷

2.3 Implications of the two Trajectories

In our contemporary society we live in a religious and denominational plurality. Many church denominations compete for converts through open air or public preaching; each denomination preaches doctrines as they have chosen to interpret them. This phenomenon presents us with the challenges exhibited in the way our faithful interpret this message and practice their faith. In regard to our two trajectories taken by the Roman Catholic and the Evangelical traditions on baptism, in principle we have learned that according to the Roman Catholic Church’s theology of the sacraments and especially of the doctrine of baptism, baptism is necessary for our salvation. It confers the grace signified to all believers who partake of it regardless of the believer’s and the celebrant’s disposition i.e. it is *ex opere operato* and *ex opere operantis*.

²⁴ Louis, Berkhof. *Systematic Theology: The Burner of Truth*, (Edinburgh: Cox & Wyman, 1979), 656.

²⁵ *Heidelberg Catechism*, Lords Day 25, on Sacraments, Question 66.

²⁶ *Heidelberg Catechism*, Lords Day 25, on Sacraments, question and response to question 67.

²⁷ Paul. *Romanism and Evangelical Christianity*, p. 23.

What is the likely implication of this understanding? What will this mean to an Evangelical Reformer who believes that once saved always saved? The implication of this teaching is that once one partakes of the sacrament of baptism they are saved and therefore, it does not matter what they do after they have been baptised. This is premised on two teachings drawn from two different traditions (Roman Catholic tradition and Evangelical traditions); if the sacrament of baptism confers salvation on me, *ex opere operato*, and once I am saved, I cannot lose my salvation,²⁸ it doesn't matter the lifestyle one adopts after they have been baptized. Such conclusion has led to the attitude that has led many people to adopt apathy to Church attendance and participation in Church activities as required by the Church.

Misconception of the work of baptism leads to false or deceptive salvation. One stays convinced that they are saved and it did not matter whether they worked on their salvation (Phil 2:12-13) or not. However, since it is expected that once one is saved they have to produce fruits of the salvation, failure could be a sign that they have lost their salvation. But because of the deception that once saved one cannot lose the salvation, the deceived lot lives a life of inactive Christianity.

There have been attempts to resolve the division on this matter. Ecumenical movements have made an effort to find a common understanding especially of the significance of sacraments of Baptism and the Eucharist.

3. An Ecumenical Attempt at Harmonization of the two Trajectories

A study of the ecumenical document dealing with Baptism, Eucharist and Ministry (BEM)²⁹, a project of the World Council of Churches (WCC), a commission which included the Roman Catholic Church and Protestant Churches, identifies five meanings of the rite of baptism. First, baptism means a participation in the death and resurrection of Jesus Christ. This understanding is drawn from Pauline theology (cf. Romans 6:3-4) which basically emphasizes union with Christ, the renewal or regeneration of the believer, and the daily walk with Christ in the newness of life.

²⁸ However, the Catholic Church does not teach that such salvation cannot be lost.

²⁹ https://www.anglicancommunion.org/media/102580/lima_document.pdf Accessed on 25/04/2021.

“Through baptism, Christians are brought into union with Christ, with each other and with the Church of every time and place.”³⁰ The three fold baptismal formula signifies a relationship with the Father, Son and the Holy Spirit.

Second, baptism is viewed as a means for the remission of sins. The act of washing with water is symbolic for the cleanliness of sins. This ritual signifies justification where the believer by the virtue of the forgiveness of sins now stands justified before God.

Third, it signified the reception of the Holy Spirit. Nonetheless, the commission observes that there are also occasions when the Spirit preceded baptism and other times when the Spirit is received following baptism and the laying on of hands. For example, in the incident of baptism of Cornelius (Acts 10) he received the Spirit before baptism and in the incidence of the baptism of the Samaritans in Act 8, the Spirit was received after the rite. However, the Spirit seals the rite of baptism.

Fourth, baptism is taken as a symbol of initiation into Christ, into the Church and into the ministry. It symbolically expresses the inclusion of the one baptized into the union with Christ, Holy Spirit and the community of believers. The baptized receives full membership into God’s family and therefore a right of participation in the life of that family including ministry, etc. It expresses the oneness of the community of believers e.g. (Gal 3: 27-28).

Fifth, it is a guarantee of God’s present and future reign. It has an eschatological dimension in which baptism as a union into God now is a foretaste of the complete reign of God in the future.

4.0 Covenantal Fidelity

4.1 *Analogia Entis* and its Justification

With the help of the clarification by the WCC in the BEM document, how best can we explain the significance of baptism and its economy of salvation in the context of contemporary African Christianity? What African familiar idioms, philosophy or metaphors could one use to liken baptism to, for better understanding of what it is?

³⁰ Ibid.

In Africa today, there are two major theological trends: liberation and inculturation. The theologians who take the inculturation trend advocate for use of traditional culturally known and enduring practices or ideologies in explaining Christian unknown mysteries. However, it is generally observed that today, with the advancement of scientific discoveries, people are now turning to science and technology for answers unlike those days when traditional diviners were consulted for answers. Despite this shift caused by scientific and technological advancement and external cultural influences, “African religious beliefs and practices have provided, and continue to provide, Africa with a philosophical fountainhead for the individual’s life and for the ordering of society.”³¹ Contemporary African theologians who advocate for inculturation argue that despite this phenomenon, there are traditional African cultural practices that have endured Westernization, scientific and technological advancement and even postmodernity. Based on this understanding, they have recommended use of the enduring cultural idioms, philosophies or elements in explaining Christian mysteries.

They recommend that there should not be an attempt to resuscitate dead or repugnant and irrelevant traditional cultural practices for use in the process of inculturation. Effort in research should be made to discover contemporary trending relevant culture that resonates with the aspirations of contemporary society. Having identified such trending philosophy or idioms, these can only be used analogously in explaining divine mysteries.

Regarding our approach to clarifying baptism and its economy of salvation, we shall employ *analogia entis*; we shall use the known, cultural idioms familiar to our audience to show how baptism confers salvation, how salvation could be lost and expectations of those who have entered the covenant of baptism.

Analogy is a stylistic literal devise used to create imageries in the mind of the listener or reader by comparing unfamiliar things or concepts with familiar ones for the purpose of clarity. In theology, the notion of *analogia entis* (analogy of the Being) operates on the principle that God through creation has revealed Godself; and that by looking at creation, we can know who God is. This is theology from below. Counter to *analogia entis* is *analogia fidei*. *Analogia fidei* on its

³¹ Mercy Amba Oduyoye, “The Value of African Religious Beliefs and Practices for Christian Theology,” in *Philosophy of Religion: The Big Questions*. Edited by Eleonore Stump and Michael J. Murray, (Oxford, Blackwell Publishers, 1999), 479.

part argues that since knowledge of God *via a posteriori* (experience) can be misleading, God has revealed the Godself *via a priori* (special revelation).³²

4.2 Baptism and Church Attendance in the Light of Covenantal Fidelity in African Christianity

Therefore, for us to understand the meaning and significance of baptism in contemporary society, we have to find an enduring universal contemporary human cardinal value that could analogically be compared to baptism and its economy of salvation. This paper identifies covenants and the fidelity to such pacts.

Mercy Amba Oduyoye identifies “covenant-making [as] a characteristic of African life”³³ which is both traditional and contemporary. Covenant-making was common in traditional Jewish and African cultures and today they are common in Christian liturgies and are a common feature among the educated and elites. Oduyoye gives an example of covenants made between the ruler and the ruled in which she states, “There is always a reciprocal oath-taking between the ruler and the ruled, who are often represented in the associated ceremonies by the elders of the community. There are also oaths and covenants between friends and others that bind members of exclusive clubs within community.”³⁴

Oduyoye goes ahead to state the consequences of infidelity to the covenant oaths; it included imminent deaths. “The person who flouts *Nsamansew* (the last will and testament of a person) is sure to be called quickly to the spirit world to render an explanation.”³⁵ In the traditional oaths, “one always swears by a divinity who thus becomes the chief witness to the transaction. Covenant meals seal reconciliation and purification ceremonies, since one cannot conceivably work to the disadvantage of another with whom a *kolanut* has been shared.”³⁶

We note that many organizations today have rules binding them together. These rules guide the entry into the organization, one’s retention in the organization and even their exit or cessation of membership.

³² Special revelations include: incarnation, sacraments, prophets, miracles, scripture...

³³ Oduyoye, “The Value of African Religious Beliefs and Practices for Christian Theology” (1999), 478.

³⁴ *Ibid.*, 478.

³⁵ *Ibid.*, 478.

³⁶ *Ibid.*, 478.

Major characteristics of any covenant is that there must be parties entering the agreement, promises made by each party are clearly stated, outward signs, and a seal to ratify the agreement and lastly the rules stated in the promises are binding.³⁷ For example, marriage is both traditional and contemporary. It is an enduring rite. “It involves the bride and bridegroom”. These are two parties that were separate before coming together. The two exchange vows in the presence of the pastor and the congregation. God is also a witness at this covenant. Wearing rings and exchange of marriage vows and marriage certificate³⁸ is the sign of the ratification of this particular covenant.

Another contemporary covenant that is very common is oaths of allegiance or loyalty by people taking up public office. It involves leadership taking up positions of public service e.g. the head of state, the ministers etc. This agreement is made between the said leaders and the people they promise to serve. In this covenant, an oath is taken during the swearing in ceremony. They (leaders) promise to serve the nation and its citizens faithfully.³⁹

In religious circles, baptism and ordination of priests/ministers can serve our purpose. Baptism is a covenant made between a believer and God in the presence of the Church congregation. The convert promises to shed off the life they have lived without Christ and take on life with Christ.

The symbolism of baptism is that, just as Christ died and was buried, so the baptized person is submerged (whether physically or symbolically) under water. And just as Christ rose again from beneath the earth, so the baptized person rises again from beneath the water. Under the water is the believer’s old, dead, heavy, suffocating life. Out of the water, cleansed by the blood of Christ, is the believer’s new, fresh, purposeful life.⁴⁰

The believer takes vows to remain faithful to God and obedient to God’s will. The convert also promises to keep the commandments of God and to serve God. The covenant is ratified through the ceremony of baptism. In this covenant, the priest and the congregation serve as witnesses.⁴¹

Another religious covenant as mentioned is ordination. Leaders taking up leadership of the Church take vows in which they promise obedience and loyalty to God, their supervisors and Body of Christ.⁴²

³⁷ <https://www.atikaschool.org/kcsecrenotes/september-16th-2016>

³⁸ <https://www.atikaschool.org/kcsecrenotes/covenants-in-modern-life>

³⁹ Ibid.

⁴⁰ <https://www.crosswalk.com/faith/spiritual-life/baptism-what-is-it-meaning-and-definition.html#0>

⁴¹ <https://www.atikaschool.org/kcsecrenotes/covenants-in-modern-life>

Key to all the above covenants is fidelity to the covenant promises or vows. Now, what happens in the event that one party breaks the promises? Terms of entry, retention and exit are applied as per the laid down rules. In legal circumstances, in the event that the vows are not kept, the agreement is cancelled with damage costs applied. Unless both parties have shown willingness to withdraw their membership, the contravening party meets the costs for breaking the agreement. The same applies to religious covenants. In the event that one party wants to leave, terms and conditions apply.

Narrowing down to baptism as a covenant, we note the terms of entry, retention and exit. The church has always regarded baptism as a rite of entry. Baptism as a covenant is an agreement between two parties, God and the believer. In this covenant, promises are made; on the believer's part, they promise to keep God's laws/statutes/ordinances. In the Anglican Confirmation and Commissioning Service, the catechumens are led by the bishop to take vows. The Bishop asks them, "Do you renounce Satan, his works and all the evil powers of this world? Do you renounce the desires of your sinful nature and all forms of idolatry?"⁴³ And on God's part, God promises to preserve them in salvation.⁴⁴ In this covenant of baptism, there are both physical and spiritual witnesses. In the Anglican Church, past, present and future saints are invoked in the liturgy. It says, "We stand together with Christians throughout the world and throughout the centuries..." Throughout the world implies those who are alive and spread abroad and throughout centuries implies those who have since passed on, those who are presently alive (physical) and those to come (spiritual).

In this covenant of baptism, signs are embossed on the believer. The signs are physical and or spiritual. The sign is an outward mark to act as a constant reminder to the parties of their obligation towards each other. In this baptism, a ceremonial ritual is enacted to seal the covenant.⁴⁵

Well, back to our question, what happens if one party contravenes the covenantal terms of the agreement? We should note that every covenant in its promises, there are terms and conditions or

⁴² **Ibid.**

⁴³ *Our Modern Services: Anglican Church of Kenya*, Nairobi: Uzima Press, 2003, 59.

⁴⁴ Note that God's character does not allow Him to renege on the promises He has made for He does not change (see 2 Corinthians 1:20).

⁴⁵ <https://www.atikaschool.org/kcsecrenotes/september-16th-2016>

consequences. In baptism the question would be: Will the believer still maintain their membership as Christians upon their lapse? Is there salvation outside the Church?

5.0 Church Attendance and Economy of Salvation

5.1 What is the Church?

Luther understood the church as the community of believers in Christ. He taught that the church in reality is only one but with attributes –namely the visible and the invisible. The invisible church is composed of the community of the elect, *the communion sanctorum*, and expressed visibly in its administration of the word and the sacraments. The visible church is an admixture of the elect/holy and the wicked/unredeemed members. The complete church is therefore not only composed of *communio sanctorum* but also *communio peccatorum* (communion of sinners).

Calvin and most other reformed theologians agreed with Luther distinguishing the two aspects of the church- the visible and the invisible. But they also emphasized that the outward unity of the church must be exercised not just in preaching of the word and sacraments but also by church disciplines.

However, Schleiermacher for example, taught that the church is a community of believers called out, constituted and empowered by the Holy Spirit. The working of the HS is manifest in the spirit of Christian fellowship, all called by the spirit are equal and therefore according to Schleiermacher the distinction between the visible and the invisible church is superfluous.

5.2 Is salvation Possible outside the Church?

According to St. Augustine, the church is the custodian of divine grace, the means by which God saves the elect, and which the church dispenses the sacraments as the outward expression of God's grace.⁴⁶ Following this school of thought, Cyprian taught that outside the Church there is no salvation (*extra ecclesiam nul solus*). Cyprian held that "They who do not subject themselves

⁴⁶ <https://rcdow.org.uk/att/files/faith/catechesis/baptism/sacraments.pdf>

to the bishop forfeit the fellowship of the church and also their salvation, since there is no salvation outside the church.”⁴⁷

Although the Catholic Church had held this position for some time, Pope Pius IX in 1854 seemed to go against the grain; who “while reaffirming that salvation outside the Church of Rome is impossible, added ‘that those who labour under invincible ignorance, are not themselves guilty of this sin before God.’”⁴⁸ He went on to state: “While the (Roman) Church is the true and ordinary institute of the grace of Jesus...this does not prevent the grace of Christ from visiting particular men without the mediation of the Church.”⁴⁹

Following the cue by Pius IX, Pope Paul II, in the Papal Encyclical, *Lumen Gentium* 16 says:

Those can also attain to everlasting salvation who through no fault of their own do not know the gospel of Christ or his church, yet sincerely seek God and, moved by his grace, strive by their deeds to do his will as it is known to them through the dictates of conscience. Nor does divine providence deny the help necessary for salvation to those who, without blame on their part, have not yet arrived at an explicit knowledge of God, but strive to live a good life, thanks to his grace.

Drawing from the foregoing discussions, it is clear that although the Catholic Church initially taught that outside the Church of Rome salvation was impossible, there has been a shift in the spirit. Karl Rahner, a 20th century Catholic theologian, says that we cannot limit God in his work in the world, and that there is grace in the world beyond the Church.

6.0 Theological Reflection

Is participation in sacrament of baptism sufficient for one’s salvation? What is the role of Church and church attendance in one’s salvation? Can one still be saved after they stopped attending Church? These are the questions we set out to address in this article.

Throughout the history of humankind, God has revealed himself through the created order. This is known as natural theology. Besides revealing himself through nature, he has also revealed himself through his Son Jesus Christ and through His divine mysteries such as sacraments, and the church; this is known as Special Revelation. God continues to reveal himself and his will to his creation (humans) by way of entering covenants with them. In the covenants, He makes his

⁴⁷ Berkhof, *Systematic Theology*: (1979), 558

⁴⁸ Paul, *Romanism and Evangelical Christianity*: (n.d):14.

⁴⁹ *Ibid.*, (n.d):14-15.

promises and humans on their part promise to keep the covenant requirements. God's covenantal promises are channeled through special means of grace called sacraments and the Church.

There is an inherent danger in misunderstanding divine mysteries. Any misconception of divine mysteries could easily lead to idolatry; Romans 1:20-23. In this text, Paul notes that although God has revealed himself (his attributes) through his creation, human beings mistook his creation for the Creator and made idols out of the created order and worshiped them. Therefore, this makes it imperative that baptism as a divine mystery is clarified, lest humans take it as an end in itself and even worship it as an idol and miss what it points at. The same applies to the Church when it is mistaken for an end, human beings could easily worship it.

The point that through sacraments and covenants God has revealed Himself is best explained by John Calvin in his discussion of the knowledge of God the Father in his *Institutes of Christian Religion*. Calvin states:

Since the perfection of blessedness consists in the knowledge of God, he has been pleased, in order that none might be excluded from the means of obtaining felicity, not only to deposit in our minds that seed of religion of which we have already spoken, but so to manifest his perfections in the whole structure of the universe, and daily place himself in our view, that we cannot open our eyes without being compelled to behold him. His essence, indeed, is incomprehensible, utterly transcending all human thought; but on each of his works his glory is engraven in characters so bright, so distinct, and so illustrious, that none, however dull and illiterate, can plead ignorance as their excuse.⁵⁰

God has revealed himself through his creation and also through his prophets and eventually through his own and only Son Jesus Christ. Through the Holy Spirit, God is present in all his creation. Therefore, we can argue that since through the Holy Spirit God is present in all his creation, creation reveals something about God. According to the Orthodox Church theology, "All our life and the creation of which we are part, points, to and reveal God."⁵¹

The divine mysteries have reflections in the natural things God has created; they speak about his invisible nature. Therefore, a proper study of the natural reveals something about the divine; similarly, a keen reflection on the divine, reveals something about God's participation in His creation (i.e. *analogia entis* and *analogia fidei* respectively). The Orthodox Church holds that,

⁵⁰ John Calvin, *Institutes of the Christian Religion*, (trans. by Henry Beveridge), Grand Rapids, Wm B. Eerdmans Publishing Co. 1998: 1:V:1 (henceforth cited as *Inst.* followed by book: chapter: paragraph).

⁵¹ Rev. Fr. Thomas Fitzgerald, "Understanding the Sacraments of the Orthodox Church", <https://www.goarch.org/-/the-sacraments> accessed on 13/09/2021.

“Not only do the Sacraments disclose and reveal God to us, but also they serve to make us receptive to God.”⁵²

Thus, the importance of knowledge of divine revealed mysteries is so that none can feign ignorance, for God has revealed himself through these divine mysteries for the purpose of human salvation. God has revealed himself through his works of creation as stated by Calvin, “Hence, the author of the Epistle to the Hebrews elegantly describes the visible worlds as images of the invisible (Heb. 11:3), the elegant structure of the world serving us as a kind of mirror, in which we may behold God, though otherwise invisible.”⁵³

We have noted that according to the Evangelical theology, sacraments are aid to faith and faith is the means to salvation and this faith is enhanced in a community of believers. If the Church and its sacraments are means by which God channels his grace to his people, then it is important for the baptized Christians to remain in the Church to continue being nourished by especially the sacrament of the Eucharist. If the Sacrament of the Eucharist re-energizes one’s faith, and it is only found in the Church, then those baptized ought to remain in the Church so as to benefit from this re-energizer.

Since in a covenant each party is expected to honour their part of the pact, and in the covenant of baptism we are initiated into the Church, absconding church attendance is failure to keep the covenant pact. This then automatically attracts the stated consequence and in this case forfeiture of salvation. Thus, renouncing church attendance and literary stopping participating in the Eucharist, which is meant to renew and strengthen one’s faith gradually leads to lose of one’s salvation.

7.0 Practical Implication

This article has been developed in order to explain the doctrine of baptism and its economy of salvation so that it can be used by the Church in its catechesis to lead converts to authentic Christian faith upholding both orthodoxy and orthopraxis. Justification of this purpose is that improper knowledge of God could lead to worship of idols and eventually to judgement as stated

⁵² Ibid.

⁵³ *Institutes*. 1:V:1

by Paul in Romans 1:18-25. The reason is that even when God had revealed himself to the extent that even a fool or illiterate have no excuse, no effort was made to know God.

Conclusion

The article established the trend of apathy to Church attendance after baptism. The article demonstrated that the reason for this trend was lack of proper knowledge of what sacrament of baptism really is. We noted that many people understood baptism as a rite of entry into the Church and once they entered, they were saved and once saved, they did not need continued participation to retain their faith necessary for their salvation.

The article sought to find out how else baptism could be explained to the African Christian converts to correct the false notion of taking baptism as efficacious in itself after which one did not need continuation of Church attendance. The article used the covenantal fidelity as a cultural element familiar to people of all times to explain by way of analogy that baptism was a covenant with God, and fidelity to its conditions was as imperative as fidelity to other secular covenantal dictates were for retention of one's faith.

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