An African understanding of baptism in the Methodist Church with special reference to the stillborn

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ABSTRACT

This thesis deals with an African understanding of baptism, regarding the baptism of stillborn babies. There are many instances of stillbirth where ministers, pastors or priests are confronted with grieving parents asking clergy to baptise a stillborn baby. It is often a request or decision of a family before the child could be buried. Furthermore, the burial of unbaptised foetuses and infants, as seen or experienced, reveals the tension between the official doctrine of the Church and the views of congregants, especially in the understanding of God's saving grace.

Parents are often worried that an unbaptised child will not find rest with the Creator God. Even a bigger issue among Africans is the place of the unbaptised stillborn child's place with the ancestors. For many African Christians, baptism must be ministered before a child is to be buried to meet his or her departed forbearers in the world of the living.

In situations like these, the pastor is faced with tension and conflict between theological and doctrinal integrity and pastoral care to the grieving parents. Despite continuous education on original sin, salvation, grace and baptism, people still insist on the baptism of the dead. There is now a change in the approach and language in that a minister performs "*christening*" on a stillborn when baptism is rejected. This 'christening' is regarded as way of introducing the child to the Christian faith and not necessarily dedicating the child to Jesus Christ. Subscribers to this notion cannot motivate or give theological meaning in what they are doing. In this way, pastors try to get past the conflict between the official doctrine on baptism and the expectations of congregants.

The sacrament of baptism, within the Methodist family, has always been understood as an outward sign of the new life that God offers to the living through the work of Christ and marks the entry of the person baptised into

God’s family, the Church. Therefore, baptism proclaims God’s grace and looks forward to life-long growth into Christ in the fellowship of the Church. It calls for the response of faith that is also a life-long process. Christianity has always held that, belonging to a Christian community is an integral expression of our faith, and thus we expect at least one parent to belong to our community.

In the Methodist Church of Southern Africa (MCSA), there are no guidelines on how to deal with this kind of request. The doctrinal understanding is very clear, i.e. baptism of the dead is not allowed. However, when one is faced with grieving parents and families, a different approach to the situation needs to be applied, bearing in mind the psychosocial space the parents are at. Stillbirth baptism is not an option, as this rite of passage is meant for the living. Christians publicly acknowledge one's confession of faith and belief in the gospel message. How would a dead person respond in faith?

Furthermore, when a person is baptised, this act is meant for those who will be members of the community of faith, the Church. It is evident even from Scripture that, neither Jesus Christ nor his disciples baptised the dead. Our salvation is not determined by us having to receive this sacred ritual. Baptism therefore, a sign and seal of our salvation as it ensures entrance into the community of faith, the church.

It has already been paid (Jn. 3:16). We do not have to do anything for God to acknowledge us as God’s. God’s acknowledgement of us is not concerned with what we do or say because God is about our hearts. Proxy baptism, as practised by some, does not have any meaning or does it have any effect on the dead person.

We are reassured of God’s grace in our journey of faith that gives us a new life that is not condemned by God. Through grace, we are pardoned, resulting in the renewal of our minds and hearts. John Wesley calls this kind

of grace, prevenient grace, that which goes before us. Unbaptised are also covered in the underserved love of God, called grace. Even though Jesus commanded that we baptise, God’s forgiveness does not depend on our earthly rituals. God freely loves us unconditionally. The purpose of sacramental rituals is to build up the Christian community, and each individual Christian within it, in a way that will make the Church as a whole and all Christians more and more powerful and effective witnesses and heralds of God's love for all people and of God's desire to give everlasting life to all human beings.

This thesis concludes that baptism of stillborn children is not following Church doctrine, but at the same time, the loss of a baby requires intense pastoral intervention and some form of rite or ceremony. Although the ritual or ceremony does not offer any divine intervention but rather, for Africans, the ritual plays a pivotal role in communicating and appeasing ancestors. A liturgy and ceremony for stillborn children is proposed.

DECLARATION

I, the undersigned, hereby declare that the work contained in this thesis: “An African understanding of Baptism in the Methodist Church with special reference to the Stillborn” is my work and that all sources I have used or quoted have been indicated and acknowledged employing complete references. Furthermore, I confirm that I have not previously submitted it in its entirety or part to any university for a degree.

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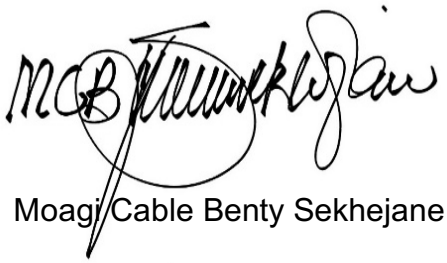

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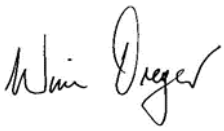

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IN MEMORIAM

In memory of my parents, Matshediso Andrew Sekhejane and Mamorweng Evelyn Sekhejane (nee Litheko).

They made it possible that I be introduced to the Christian faith and be nurtured in its values and norms.

Thank you, Mom, for the gift of the Bible you left me.

May your souls Rest in Eternal Peace and Rise in Glory.

DEDICATION

I would like to dedicate this work to my wife, Dr Julia Phindile Sekhejane (nee Kubheka) and my two sons Naledi & Uminathi.

Without their support and care, I wouldn't have made it thus far. You are one in a million.

TERMINOLOGY

Certain basic concepts of this thesis will be used to clarify terms that may have different meanings.

Ubuntu: Bantu term meaning "humanity".

Kuruetso: A Sesotho term, a process by which a newborn is finally, after two months since birth, and when it is a full moon, is introduced to the ancestors and brought outside to 'see' the moon as a sign that he is introduced to the created order.

Imbeleko: A ceremony that is conducted on the 10th day after the baby is born, or later. This is an act of detaching the umbilical connection from the mother and introducing the child to the ancestors. A traditional ceremony where the umbilical cord and afterbirth of a newborn baby are buried on ancestral grounds as a means of introducing the baby to their clan, their ancestors, and their elders.

(https://berkleycenter.georgetown.edu/posts/reimagining-community-through-imbeleko)

Lebollo: Circumcision - A Sesotho cultural practice that transitions boys in the Basotho (Sesotho speaking people) society to manhood.

Bashemane: Boys

Banna: Men

Basuwe: Initiation school teachers

Monga lebollo: The owner of the Initiation school.

Badimo: Ancestors

Modimo: God

Umuntu ngumuntu ngabantu: A Isizulu phrase meaning " we are because we belong"

Thari e tla mpepang: A vehicle that carries one away to after-life

Mosima o sa tlaleng: Hole that never gets filled… referring to the world of the living dead where God reigns

Mophato: A hut built for circumcision initiates as a dwelling place for the duration of their stay in the mountains

Tsebeletso: A service

Sebôkô: Family line which normally includes 'clan' name

Ngwana o hodiswa ke setjhaba: "It takes a village to raise a child"

Stillbirth: A foetus that had at least 26 weeks of intra-uterine existence but showed no sign of life after complete birth.

Burial: The burial of a corpse in the ground of a person, which is said to include an adult, a child, a baby and a stillborn baby.

Foetus: Foetus in this thesis will refer to an unborn child whilst in utero for the nine months before birth or death in utero or ex utero.

African: A native or inhabitant of Africa with African ancestry.

LIST OF ABBREVIATIONS

AIDS	Acquired Immune Deficiency Syndrome
AV	Authorised Version
BOO	Book of Order Methodist Church of Southern Africa
COVID-19	Coronavirus Disease
DHS	Demographic and Health Surveys
ENAP	Every Newborn Action Plan
ESV	English Standard Version
HIV	Human Immunodeficiency Virus
KJV	King James Version
MCSA	The Methodist Church of Southern Africa
MeSH	Medical Subject Heading
NT	New Testament
NASB	New American Standard Bible
NIV	New International Version
NLT	New Living Translation
NRSV	New Revised Standard Version
OT	Old Testament

PTSD	Post-Traumatic Stress Disorder
UN	United Nations
WCC	World Council of Churches
WHO	World Health Organisation

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1. INTRODUCTION

1.1. General remarks

As an introductory remark, it must be stated that funeral rituals in Africa are deeply rooted in the cultural beliefs, traditions, and indigenous religions of the continent. They are guided by the belief in our existence after death, and the role of the ancestors. Rituals on the African continent evolved through the infusion of Christianity, Islam and modern changes. Ekore & Lanre-Abass (2016) say the following:

> "According to the African belief system, life does not end with death but continues in another realm. It is an African cultural belief that to be in the world of the dead confers supernatural powers over those in the world of the living, such as the ability to bless or to curse, and to give life or to take life among others. The departed relatives remain in the family circle as the living dead. The deceased remain 'alive' in the memories of individuals in their family membership compared with families of European origin. Becoming an ancestor after death is a desirable goal of most African, a feat which cannot be achieved if an individual asks for an unnatural death by attempting to utilize advance care directives." (Ekore & Lanre-Abass 2016: 369-373)

According to Dancy and Davis (2004: 187-211), death is a "universal, natural, persistent, and undeniable fact of life." When a death occurs, there is usually an impact on the family and friends of the deceased, the magnitude often depends on whether the death was expected or unexpected (Dancy & Davis 2004: 187-211).

"Death rituals and the mourning practices of Africans are varied because of the existence of so many religious and cultural practices" (Koenig & Marshall 2004). In Africa, individuals are brought up from childhood with a sense of belonging and relatedness to others. Mbiti (1990) believes that

“people have a sense of obligation to a larger set of other individuals (the *Ubuntu* spirit). This means that, what happens to one person, happens to the community, and whatever happens to the community happens to the individual … I am, because we are; and since we are, therefore I am.”

Many African families will engage in one way or the other, in some cleansing rituals after a death of a loved one including stillborn. These rituals are done not only to remove uncleanliness or bad spirit left after somebody has died, but it is also for the benefit even of the one who has lost life. In Sesotho culture and tradition, the following are the reasons for the cleansing of the parents or families of the deceased, namely:

- Naming the child after one of the great ancestors and initiation into the clan.
- Cutting ties with the physical child for the immediate release to ancestors and ‘allow’ the child a smooth journey back to his/her ancestors.
- Appeasing the ancestors to welcome the child in their spiritual realm.
- Removing all hindrances that might cause the spirit of the child to roam around without finding a resting place with his/her forebears.
- To the mother of the stillborn, the ritual is done to remove any bad luck that came with losing the child.
- It is also a plea to ancestors to assist in talking to the creator God for successful subsequent pregnancy.

Failure to go through a process of cleansing or some kind of purification, it is believed that both the deceased child and the parents might experience rejection from the ancestors. In most cases, cleansing or purification ceremonies are mainly done for the living to appease the ancestors, ask for

their intervention and create a new beginning for those who lost their loved ones.

In the history of Christianity, various beliefs, practices and rites developed in various Christian communities. The development of Christian rites was influenced by the cultural and social context of different communities. One of the earliest rites which established itself within Christian communities was the baptism of new converts and later, also children of believers. (http://www.evdio.org/uploads/2/6/3/0/26308718/rcia_zoom_1_handouts.pdf)

In the early church, baptism of adult converts normally followed upon instruction (catechesis). With the rapid growth of the early Church (see Dreyer 2012), many catechumens were instructed and then baptised. A candidate for baptism had to be instructed in the truths of the faith and come to understand them (Larere 1993:33). The candidates for baptism could remain catechumens for many years, even though they had been received into the Church and were already considered members of the community. Together, at the back of the basilica, they attended the first part of Mass, made up principally of several readings of the Word; but they left at the moment when the celebration of the Eucharist began, that is, just after the proclamation of the gospel. During feasts in general and Easter in particular, a certain number of them would be baptised; from the first preparatory meeting on, they are no longer called catechumens, but the “elect”. On the Wednesday of the third week of Lent, the elect who are going to be baptised at the Easter vigil would gather at the Church by clergy, priests, deacons and exorcists with their godfathers and godmothers and the community to undergo scrutiny.

> “The scrutinies are formed in the language of liturgical prayer. During the scrutiny, those preparing for Baptism, Confirmation, and

> Eucharist at the Easter Vigil typically kneel down, and the presider and assembly pray over them, asking God to strengthen and assist them to more clearly live out God's love. At this time, these individuals are also invited, with God's help, to turn away from sin and evil."
> (http://pastoralliturgy.org/resources/WhatAretheScrutinies.pdf)

It consisted in verifying the aptitude of the candidate to live the Christian life, and this examination was the test that permitted one to be elected. This preparatory meeting had its prayers and rituals. On the invitation of the deacon, each candidate was blessed by their godfather or godmother, who signed them "in the name of the Father and the Son and of the Holy Spirit".

In terms of Christian baptism, diverse beliefs, practices, customs and rites developed through the centuries. This will be discussed in the following chapters. Today, there is more uniformity in the understanding of baptism. Much work had been done by the international ecumenical movements of the 20th century to reach a consensus of how baptism (and other Christian beliefs, practices and rites) should be understood. The World Council of Churches, in the famous 1982 'BEM' document (*Baptism, Eucharist and Ministry*), articulates this consensus as follows:

> "Baptism is related not only to momentary experience but to life-long growth into Christ. Those baptised are called upon to reflect the glory of the Lord as they are transformed by the power of the Holy Spirit, into his likeness, with ever-increasing splendour (2 Cor. 3:18). The life of the Christian is necessarily one of continuing struggle yet also of the continuing experience of grace. In this new relationship, the baptised live for sake of Christ, of His Church and the world which he loves, while they wait in hope for the manifestation of God's new creation and for the time when God will be all in all (Rom. 8:18-24; 1 Cor. 15:22-28)

> … Throughout the course of history, the practice of baptism has developed in a variety of forms. Some Churches baptise infants brought by parents or guardians who are ready, in and with the Church, to bring up the children in the Christian faith. Other Churches practice exclusively the baptism of believers who are able to make a personal confession of faith. Some of these Churches encourage infants or children to be presented and blessed in a service that usually involves thanksgiving for the gift of the child and also the commitment of the mother and father to Christian parenthood. Both baptisms of believers or infant baptism take place in the Church in the presence of the community of faith. When one who can answer for himself or herself is baptised, a personal confession of faith will be an integral part of the baptismal service. When an infant is baptised, the personal response will be offered at a later moment in life. In both cases, the baptised person will have to grow in the understanding of faith." (WCC 1982: 6)

Diversity in the practice of Christian baptism is also evident in Africa, more particularly in the current situation. Ministers and Churches are often confronted with requests for baptism that are contrary to the generally accepted understanding of baptism. Ministers and Churches are often at a loss for answers when challenged about the orthodox (Western) understanding of baptism.

In this research, three questions stand in dialectical tension: (1) The traditional (doctrinal) understanding of baptism; (2) the African context and culture; and (3) specific issues concerning the growing practice of baptising stillborn babies, as experienced within the Methodist Church of South Africa. It is argued that African culture and practices about birth and death should be taken into consideration in the process of finding some consensus when grieving parents request the baptism of a stillborn. Furthermore, pastoral

care and concern for the well-being of the parents must be considered. These issues will be addressed in the following chapters.

1.2. Field of research

This research lies in the field of historical theology (see Dreyer 2017). The historical dimension of the Christian faith is bound to the fact that God acts in history, from creation to the coming of the new earth. Seen from this perspective, Historical Theology is first and foremost *theology*. Individuals working in the field of historical theology are theologians, not historians, although they make use of research methods associated with historical enquiry. Four core issues present themselves in terms of historical theology:

- The history of the Church in diverse contexts and traditions
- Theology and theologians through the centuries
- Origins and development of Christian faith and doctrine.
- Church polity and ecclesiology.

This thesis will focus on the third of these issues, namely the origin and historical development of Christian faith and doctrine, with specific reference to the sacrament of baptism.

1.3. Research gap

This research will focus on the issue of an African understanding of baptism, with specific reference to stillborn babies. It is evident, based on the literature review, that there is very limited information available on the issue of stillbirth baptism. A lot of material had been published from medical and juridical perspectives, which do not necessarily assist theological reflection. Very little had been published by theologians.

In the Methodist Church, no records of stillbirth baptism are kept in Church archives. There is also no pastoral guidance or liturgies available to assist with grieving families. There is also limited data available written by theologians on the matter. Stillbirth is still treated together with neonatal and miscarriage deaths and does not receive the necessary attention it deserves.

This research is an attempt to address some issues pertaining to stillbirth and baptism within an African context, from a theological perspective. As such, it will address the current research gap and lack of published material.

1.4. Motivation for this research

Death is a very painful and unavoidable reality that all of us are bound to go through. It is even more painful when a mother gives birth to a stillborn. During this time of loss, there are several issues at play that pastors need to deal with, including pastoral intervention and various requests from grieving parents. In recent years, a new phenomenon presented itself amongst Methodist congregants: Church members increasingly request the ministration of the sacrament of baptism to stillborn children.

This practice is a contradiction of accepted Christian doctrine and practice, specifically in the Methodist Church and the Protestant tradition in general. Church members are beginning to contradict the orthodox doctrine and understanding of baptism, under influence of traditional African beliefs and culture. The insistence that stillborn babies must be baptised, regardless of what constitutes Christian (and Wesleyan) doctrine, was the direct stimulus for this research.

It is also clear that the practice of stillborn baptism has far-reaching implications, including a misunderstanding of Scripture (for instance 1 Cor. 15:29); but also fundamental Christian doctrines about salvation, grace, and

eternal life. Because of the interrelatedness of these doctrines, this research will also address (in a very limited manner) issues of the doctrines of the sacraments, original sin, salvation, grace and the doctrine of election. An attempt will be made to discuss these issues from the perspective of African culture, tradition, and ancestral beliefs. 'African culture' will be limited to the Sotho culture, well aware that there are many different varieties of African culture and beliefs.

In Africa, death is a stark reality. Africa is confronted with severe illness and pandemics, such as malaria, tuberculosis, HIV-AIDS and recently, Covid-19. Millions of people die annually on the African continent. As a result, many Africans are confronted with questions of life after death. Baptism is perceived by many, as portrayed by many pastors, preachers and ministers, as a vehicle or access to receive eternal life or finding a resting place with the creator God. This will lead to dealing with the understanding of what heaven is, specifically dealing with the concept of life after death.

1.5. Aim of Study

This study aims to explain what baptism is, and what it is not. I will deal with both the Old and New Testaments because, in a reformed theological tradition, questions of doctrine always relate to our understanding of Scripture. Furthermore, within the context of postcolonial discourse and African theology, an attempt will be made to interpret the relevant issues from an African understanding of community (*Ubuntu*) and the role of ancestors among the African Christians. Concepts such as the introduction of infants to their ancestors (*Kuruetso* in the Sesotho cultures) will be highlighted. The research will also show how the two cultures are similar and not antagonising, as it is commonly suggested or perceived.

Methodist theological and pastoral considerations on the subject will be dealt with in terms of the "Four All's" as taught by John Wesley. The

research will also attend to pastoral guidelines and liturgies for grieving the loss of a stillborn. These liturgies could be used as a reminder that the rite of baptism is celebrated for the living and not for the dead (Heb. 9:27).

1.6. Hypothesis

The research is based on the hypothesis that many Christians still don't believe that an unbaptised stillborn or a dead person will find a resting place with the Creator God when they die, especially that it is generally understood that this act of grace is known to be received into the body of Christ. Furthermore, people believe that baptism gives access into heaven or rather a place to be with God – failing which, a stillborn or any unbaptised person, is lost as to his/her final resting place with the creator God.

This conviction that baptism is a means of grace runs contrary to the gospel of God's unconditional love for humanity. We are not expected to do anything for God to love us – He first loved us. Baptism as an outward sign of God's love and grace should never become a 'ticket to heaven'. Scripture teaches us that "for it is by grace you have been saved, through faith - and this is not from yourselves, it is the gift of God - not by works, so that no one can boast "(Eph. 2:8-9).

1.7. Objectives

The objective of this research is to reflect theologically on the phenomenon of the baptism of stillborn babies from scriptural, historical and systematic perspectives within the African context; and to find some consensus on how the baptism of stillborn babies should be regarded and managed from a liturgical and pastoral perspective. The research will show how the bible does not support baptism of the dead, and that there is no record in history that shows any baptism of stillborn nor compelling theological evidence to back up this practice.

1.8. Research Methodology

The research will be done based on a literature study. Initially, empirical research was considered as a possible methodological approach in light of limited sources. Due to ethical, legal and medical concerns, this approach was abandoned and will be left to researchers working in the field of Practical Theology. However, I will share black African cultures, rituals and traditions to add to the research.

The research requires scriptural exegesis, historical analysis as well as systematic reflection. It also requires contextual analysis, specifically the context of African religion and culture. Finally, some attention is given to pastoral theology.

Taking into account that the research also investigates a growing interest in stillborn baptism among African people, the research will give special attention to African writers, my experience and theologians. Reflection on Sesotho culture, African Traditional Religion, initiation by circumcision and death rituals will be discussed. The role of ancestors with the living will also be dealt with. The concept of '*Ubuntu'* (living in a community) and the role of ancestors (and African culture and traditions from Sesotho) will be discussed.

1.9. Structure of Chapters

- Chapter 1: Introduction

This section deals with the content, structure and methodology of the research.

- Chapter 2: Hermeneutical Perspectives

In the reformed tradition, theological reflection departs from Holy Scripture. In this chapter, the question is if there is any scriptural evidence that would support or deny the baptism of the dead, and per implication, the baptism of stillborn babies.

- Chapter 3: Historical Perspectives

This chapter will discuss a few selected examples of baptism practices in the history of Christianity, which could help us clarify the issue at hand.

- Chapter 4: Systematic Perspectives

In this chapter, various doctrines relevant to baptism are discussed. Particular attention will be given to views of the Methodist Church.

- Chapter 5: Contextual Analysis

In this chapter, some aspects of African religion and culture are analysed, as context and background to the question at hand.

- Chapter 6: Strategic Perspectives

In this chapter, pastoral and liturgical considerations are taken into account. A liturgy and rituals are proposed.

- Chapter 6: Conclusions

In this section, I will analyse the research and arguments to answer the question: “Is stillbirth baptism necessary?”

1.10. Literature Review

Investigating the baptism of stillborn, it became clear that the Methodist Church never practised or believed in the baptism of the dead and per

implication stillborn children. As a result, there is no material, guidelines or work done regarding the topic at hand. If possible, data on the subject will be gathered from the Methodist Church of Southern Africa, and other Wesleyan denominations.

There were periods in history when the baptism of the dead was practised. These will be investigated employing a literature study.

In pursuit of the African understanding of baptism, African literature on the subject will be explored to deal with issues such as the role and place of ancestors, the life after, the notion of *Ubuntu* and last bring into the research, the relationship between African Sotho initiation and Christian baptism.

Prof. John Mbiti's contribution to the African theology and religion discourse will be used extensively, as he captures the heart of African personality. He brings to light, the religions and philosophy that governs an African, the African understanding of the Supreme Being, the nature and mode of African worship, and the interface between African religion and the western world. He further explores and introduces his *Ubuntu* (humane) and communal perspective in understanding African religions and philosophy.

Another influential author is Prof. G.M. Setiloane, a Methodist minister and academic. He has written extensively on African theology and philosophy. His work will assist in the contribution to the current African religion scholarship, his comprehensive understanding of divinity in African theology that encompasses all - all the *living* and the *dead.*

2. HERMENEUTICAL PERSPECTIVES

2.1. Introduction

This chapter reflects on a few relevant concepts from Scripture, and how it could help us to understand the rites, customs and beliefs of God's people concerning baptism. The relevance of these insights and concepts will become clear in later chapters when we will return to them.

In Matthew 28:19-20 we find the Great Commandment: "Therefore, go and make disciples of all nations, baptising them in the name of the Father and of the Son and the Holy Spirit." Jesus said we should go into the world and spread the good news announcing the message of God to one and all. Whoever believes and is baptised will be saved. The latter part of Mark 16:16 says: 'He that believeth and is baptized shall be saved; but he that believeth not shall be damned', Therefore, believing in Jesus Christ is the requisite of being saved, that is, faith alone is required and not baptism.

Baptism is a symbol of Christ's burial and resurrection. Our entrance into the water during baptism identifies us with Christ's death on the cross, His burial in the tomb and His resurrection from the dead. Baptism identifies the believer with the Godhead: Father, Son, and Holy Spirit. Baptism signifies unity with Christ in His death, burial, and resurrection. "For you were buried with Christ when you were baptised. And with him you were raised to a new life because you trusted the mighty power of God, who raised Christ from the dead." (Colossians 2:11-12, NLT) "We were therefore buried with Him through baptism into death so that, just as Christ was raised from the dead through the glory of the Father, we too may live a new life." (Romans 6:4, NIV).

> "Baptism is meant to bring us in repentance to receive the forgiveness of sins. Otherwise, humanity shall have to face the righteous judgment

> of God. It points forward to the cleansing and indwelling of the Holy Spirit which Jesus would make possible. Nobody is so good that they do not need this: nobody is so bad that they cannot receive it. In every case, however, it must mark the start of a new life which involves moral change. The baptism of Jesus himself takes us much further… It was in this sacrament that he was anointed by the Holy Spirit. It was at his baptism that he perceived his status as Son and his role as Servant. It was here that he received his commission for a life of ministry. Christian baptism includes all these things, because, above all else, it unites our lives with that of Jesus. The New Testament does not spend a lot of time theorizing about baptism. It makes it plain that the early Christians obeyed their Master and went about actually doing it. But in the course of the New Testament, there are many explanatory allusions to baptism. Here are some of them, and varied though they are, they all point decisively in a single direction." (Green 2017: 45)

2.2. Ritual washings

From the very beginning, water has been an important part of creation, a substance that is necessary for life as we know it, and something that defines many of the earth's boundaries and conditions. It is something of great value and something that appears in multiple forms. Not only is it important in the understanding of natural lessons and events, but also the teaching of spiritual lessons. Unlike many parts of the creation, it is not necessarily identified by its shape but takes on the shape of what it inhabits or its location. Lessons about water include amazing examples of miracles, such as the crossing of the Red Sea and the river Jordan, Jesus turning the water into wine, and Jesus walking on the water on the Sea of Galilee. Its use in the Bible is sometimes symbolic as well as literal. The river Jordan is now sometimes referred to as that boundary between earthly life and life eternal, and crossing it refers to the time of natural death. The water of life

refers to the Spirit of God which moves and takes up an abode in an individual in spiritual birth (Webb 2020: 3).

> "Water is mentioned a total of 722 times in the Bible, more often than faith, hope, prayer, and worship. In the Bible, it doesn't take long for water to be mentioned. Right away in Genesis 1:2, "The earth was a formless void and darkness covered the face of the deep, while a wind from God swept over the face of the waters." Water is such an essential component of life; it was created on the very first day." (https://sites.duke.edu/theconnection/2014/06/05/remembering-gods-gift-of-water/)

The use of water as a means of purification or washing is widespread in religions of the world. It was common in the religious activities of Greeks and Romans in the period surrounding the rise of Christianity. Sacred sites had fountains or another source of water to be used for the ceremonial cleansing of worshipers and officiants at the sanctuary. Particular interest attaches to washings with water in initiation to the Mystery Religions, because some have associated these with the practice of Christian baptism. The Mystery Religions did occasionally express ideas of forgiveness, rebirth after a mystic death, eternal life, and illumination, but these ideas were associated with the ceremony as a whole and not primarily with the purification by water. The latter was a preliminary preparation for the initiation and had the same purpose of ritual purification as in the other cults treated above (Ferguson 2009: 962 of 2092).

In Revelation 22:17 we read: "The Spirit and the bride say, 'Come.' And let everyone who hears say, 'Come.' And let everyone who is thirsty come. Let anyone who wishes take the water of life as a gift." The word 'water' in the Bible is a common feature, and this is a reminder for us of its importance both spiritually and physically.

Baptism, in its earliest phase, was seen to be a rite that washed away moral dirt. This is why the early Christians connected baptism to moral transformation. Notice these texts: As many of you as were baptised into Christ have clothed yourselves with Christ. (Gal. 3:27) And this [list of sinful types of people] is what some of you used to be. But you were washed, you were sanctified, you were justified in the name of the Lord Jesus Christ and the Spirit of our God. (1 Cor. 6:11, emphasis added) And baptism, which this prefigured, now saves you— not as a removal of dirt from the body, but as an appeal to God for a good conscience, through the resurrection of Jesus Christ, who has gone into heaven and is at the right hand of God, with angels, authorities, and powers made subject to him. (1 Pet. 3:21-22)

> "Baptism is the Church's rite of offering to others entrance into the waters in order to be purified so that the person can enter into union with Christ and the body of Christ. This is what atonement is all about. Baptism is the Church's praxis-rite of atonement; it is one way that the Church offers atonement to others; and it is how the Church offers purification and incorporation— or restored relationship— with God, self, and others as a missional people." (McKnight 2005: 151)

During the time of John the Baptist and Jesus, immersion for spiritual cleansing was more than just an accepted practice in Judaism, it was often required to be considered ritually clean before God.

> "In the second century B.C., continuous ritual purity, which had previously been prescribed only for the priests, was deemed important for all Jews. All the people of Israel were to keep a state of ritual purity all the time, especially within the city of Jerusalem. Not only the Temple Mount but all of Jerusalem was considered holy and to be honoured with ritual purity." (Schoenheit 2013: 453)

In the Old Testament, the practice of washing in water started with the Mosaic Law, about 1450 BC. However, a study of the whole Old Testament shows that water had various symbolic meanings. One meaning was that going through water was a symbol of separating the old from the new (Schoenheit 2013: 431). Noah entered into a new life after the flood, Israel entered into a new life after the passage through the Red Sea. Other ritual washings had to do with spiritual cleansing as well as a symbolic cleansing of sin.

Mosaic Law has many references to washing in water. The vast majority of the references concerned being spiritually clean in the sight of God. The Tent of Meeting ("Tabernacle") that was set up during the time of Moses had a bronze basin for washing in water. The priests washed their hands and feet in it so that they would be clean in the sight of God and not die while serving God (Exod. 30:17-21). Before Aaron and his sons could minister in the Tent of Meeting, they were washed in water (Exod. 40:12). Similarly, the Levites washed before they could minister (Num. 8:6, 7). Another reference is Moses' Tent of Meeting, which was eventually replaced by the Temple that Solomon built (c. 950 BC), and the washing ceremonies continued. Moses' bronze basin was replaced by a huge "bronze sea" that has been estimated to have held about 12,000 gallons, as well as ten other, smaller basins for cleansing (2 Chron. 4:2-6). Richard (2019) formulates it as follows:

> "When we look back at these ritual washings (of which there are at least eleven), we see the repeated requirement to wash garments, objects, and people in water in order to rid them of their ceremonial uncleanness. Sometimes this washing is partial, as in Exodus 30:18–21, in which the priests are commanded to wash only their hands and feet before entering the tabernacle. Sometimes it is wholesale, as in Leviticus 14, where individuals are commanded to wash their whole

> bodies and also their clothes. In all these cases, however, washing or cleansing in water is the common feature. Thus, when we consider the example of Naaman from 2 Kings 5 together with the many ritual baptisms from the Old Testament, we are able to conclude that the first-century Jew would have regarded baptism as a rite of washing or cleansing in water. The way this water would have been applied would have been less important than the meaning behind its application. For the first-century Jew, baptism would have meant cleansing or purification, and it would have been applied directly to the person who is unclean in the sight of God in order to wash him and render him clean or pure before God." (Richard 2019: 178-192).

Rituals like cleansing and washing, are important life practices and customs that many people or families have been involved in. They go back to time immemorial (Schoenheit 2013: 691), and they constitute a way of life, that is, ordering of family values, friendships, work, play, and personal lives. They speak to who we are concerning our identities, both individually and communally. In an African context, these rituals are normally handed over from generation to generation through oral tradition. This can be summed up that, "in African tradition, religion and culture are based on an 'unwritten, an undocumented philosophy'" (Gyekye 1987: 51), meaning, in African tradition significant knowledge is passed on orally.

The Law of Moses provided ceremonial applications of water for purposes of cleansing or purification and included a degree of detail lacking in Greco-Roman sources. This practice applied to human beings and inanimate objects: "Whoever touches the carcass of any [unclean animal] shall be unclean until the evening, and whoever carries any part of the carcass of any of them shall wash his clothes and be unclean until the evening." Any "article of wood, cloth, skin, or sacking" on which a dead unclean animal falls "shall be dipped into water, and it shall be unclean until evening" (Lev

11:32). Uncleanness is also attached to a person who touched the dead body of a human being, making that person unclean for seven days.

> "Whoever touches a corpse is ritually unclean for seven days. He must purify himself with the water for purification on the third day and on the seventh day, and then he will be clean. But if he does not purify himself on both the third and the seventh day, he will not be clean… "The clean person shall sprinkle the unclean ones on the third day and on the seventh day, thus purifying him on the seventh day. Then he shall wash his clothes and bathe himself in water, and at evening he shall be clean." (Lev. 11)

Other occasions of ceremonial defilement required the use of water in purification. A man after a discharge of semen and a woman after the discharge of her monthly period were ceremonially unclean and had to wash their clothes and bathe in water; so did anyone who touched them, their clothing, or their bedding (Schoenheit 2013: 453). A distinction was made in the vocabulary employed for washing clothes and bathing, and between dipping an object and pouring and sprinkling various substances. This is illustrated by the account of the cleansing of a person cured of a skin disease:

> "The priest shall take the living bird with the cedar wood and the crimson yarn and the hyssop, and dip them and the living bird in the blood of the bird that was slaughtered over the fresh water (Leviticus 14:4). He shall sprinkle it seven times upon the one who is to be cleansed of the leprous disease; then he shall pronounce him clean. The one who is to be cleansed shall wash his clothes, and shave off all his hair, and bathe himself in water, and he shall be clean. The priest shall take some of the oil and pour it into the palm of his left hand, and dip his right finger in the oil that is in his left hand and

sprinkle some oil with his finger seven times before the Lord." (Leviticus 14:15-16)

The ritual requirements of the Law provided the imagery and vocabulary for the prophetic description of God's future purification of his people. Thus Ezekiel quotes God: "I will sprinkle clean water upon you, and you shall be clean from all your uncleanness, and from all your idols I will cleanse you. A new heart I will give you, and a new spirit I will put within you… (Ezekiel 36:25-28) (Ferguson 2009: 1711 of 2092).

As well as the imagery of washing for spiritual cleansing, the Old Testament contained the idea of going through water as a symbol of initiation, moving from the old to the new. This was also the case as we move from the Old to the New Testament. "The historical origins of Christian baptism could be traced to OT ritual purifications. Many make the claim that Christian baptism began with John the Baptist, but this simply cannot be true" (Wuori 2019: 36).

For millennia people have thought that there was a connection between being physically clean and spiritually clean. Thus, although we usually think of "baptism" as being a Jewish and then a Christian practice, actually "ablution or bathing was common in most ancient nations as a preparation for prayers and sacrifice, or as expiatory of sin." There were forms of baptism that were practised by many different groups and societies, including those in Egypt, Greece, Rome, and in mystery religions such as the Eleusinian Mysteries and the worship of Isis. These rites were still common around the time of Christ.

Baptism symbolises washing, cleansing and regeneration (1 Cor. 6:11). This text describes believers as washed, sanctified and justified in the name of the Lord Jesus and by the Spirit of God. The mentioning of washing along with 'in the name of the Lord Jesus' echoes Acts 22:16 which refers to

baptism. The physical water cannot remove spiritual stains. Even in the lives of the Israelites, the shed blood of Jesus Christ represents the cleansing of sins. In 1 John 1:7, “But if we walk in the light, as he is in the light, we have fellowship with one another, and the blood of Jesus Christ God’s son cleanses us from all sin.” Furthermore, in Revelation 1:5, “and from Jesus Christ, who is the faithful witness, and the first begotten of the dead, and the prince of the kings of the earth. Unto him, that loved us, and washed us from our sins in his own blood.”

It was also believed that baptism saves us, not as a removal of dirt from the body but as an appeal to God for a good conscience, through the resurrection of Jesus Christ, who has gone into heaven ...” (1 Peter 3:20-22). Noah and company were identified with the Ark, the LORD locked them in and they were saved. All other “flesh” outside in the waters died (Genesis 7:21). Peter says that “Baptism ... which corresponds to this, now saves you”. “Corresponds” is a translation of *antitupon*, “prefigured” NRSV, lit. “fulfilment of (the) type”. The Companion Bible takes the KJV translation “the like figure” (v.21) to refer to “water” and points to the usage of *antitupon* in Hebrews 9:24, the only other place this word is used in the New Testament (Sherring 2001: 129-133).

Instances of a person’s immersion in water in the Greek translation (Septuagint) of the Old Testament became significant for the understanding of baptism in the early Church. Notable is the account of the cleansing of Naaman from leprosy by washing in the Jordan River (2 Kings 5:1-14), an event not used in the New Testament as a type of Christian baptism but one that some Christians later saw as illustrating the action of baptism, its application to Gentiles, and the necessity of obedience. Naaman was a Syrian military commander afflicted with a skin disease. The prophet Elisha commanded him to wash seven times in the Jordan River. Naaman at first objected that there were better rivers in Damascus, but his servants

persuaded him that if he would have done something difficult at the prophet's command, then how much more he should follow the command to "wash and be clean." When he immersed himself seven times in the Jordan, he came up with his flesh restored to that of his youth. The Greek translation "wash yourself," for Elisha's command with the promise that he would be purified, but "he immersed (or dipped) himself," for his compliance with the command. It is noted that in the discussion of Christian usage that "wash" often was understood as equivalent to "baptise" and was carried out by a dipping (Ferguson 2009: 962 of 2092). The significant thing about this passage is "the fact that "wash" in verse 10 and "baptise" in verse 14 are used interchangeably.

> "Hebrews 9:10 is another significant passage that helps shed some light on the Jewish understanding of baptism leading up to the first century. It tells us unequivocally that the Old Testament ceremonial system, long before the time of Christ, included many different kinds of ritual "baptisms." Although this passage does not explicitly tell us which specific kinds of rituals were known as baptisms, it does alert us as to their presence in the Old Testament." (Richard 2019: 178)

This aspect of water baptism, including the symbol of death and resurrection, did not get the attention that baptism did as a symbol for cleansing. The symbolic meaning of baptism as a kind of initiation is not clearly stated, and different scholars have seen different meanings in the ceremony, such as dying and being resurrected into a new life, or having a separation from the old life, or leaving the old and entering the new. This washing or cleansing as an initiation is confirmed in the New Testament in verses such as 1 Cor. 10:2, which speaks of Israel being "baptised into Moses in the cloud and in the sea." (Schoenheit 2013: 517). The "baptism" of Israel when the people left Egypt was more than just for cleansing; it symbolised the birth of the new nation and entering into a new relationship

with God, which would include the covenant they entered into with Him at Sinai when He gave them the Law. We see the same idea of baptism as a kind of initiation that separated people from their past. In 1 Peter 3:20, we read; Noah was one of eight people separated from an evil society by the Flood. Then verse 21 compares the water of the Flood with baptism. Both Noah's Flood and Israel's passing through the Red Sea are symbolic of baptism; however, the relevant aspect is not ritual cleansing from sin, but being "saved," i.e., passing from the old to the new.

2.3. Covenant

Another relevant concept to be found in the Old and New Testaments is "covenant". Several covenants are identified in the Old Testament that shows a relation with God and God's people over some time. Furthermore, one of the most important features of a biblical theology of the temple is how God makes a major covenant at every major temple in the Bible, and how God does this on a holy or cosmic mountain. Interestingly, mountains were places where God's covenant promises were consummated (Donaldson 1985: 83).

> "When God enters into covenants with His people, making promises of redemption to them, God's pattern is to attest to the authenticity of the covenant by giving some kind of external sign. For instance, when He promised Noah that He would never destroy the world again through a flood, God set His bow in the sky. That bow was a visible sign that confirmed the promise of God for the future of this planet. He was saying that every time we see a rainbow, we should be reminded that God has promised never to destroy the world again with a flood. Similarly, after instituting His covenant with Abraham, God gave Abraham and his descendants a sign of their membership in the covenant: circumcision. This sign had a dual significance. On

> the one hand, the cutting of the foreskin was a sign that God was saying, “I am cutting you out from the rest of fallen humanity and consecrating you as a nation to Myself.” At the same time, the sign was a testimony by the people, saying, as it were, “O God if I fail to keep the terms of this covenant if I fail to be faithful to You in this covenant relationship, may I be cut off from all of the benefits of Your covenant promises.” (Sproul 2011: 27)

Circumcision symbolised both the blessings and the curses of God’s covenant with Abraham. The rite of circumcision was given for all generations of Israelites as the sign of the old covenant. That’s why, if we were to ask a Jew to identify the sign of God’s covenant with His people, he would say that the sign is circumcision.

God promised Abraham and his family that God will bless them with a piece of land that will consequently be a blessing to human beings. This was God’s redemptive act towards humanity. In this covenant, circumcision is the sign or symbol that is at the heart of it all, a symbol setting Abraham’s family apart from God. The family was to keep this tradition (circumcision) as a covenant for generations to come.

Circumcision as a ritual and a covenant sign had been in practice from the period of the Old Testament. “This ritual or tradition was not followed by Noah before the flood event and until Abraham” (Vasa & Vasa 2014: 254). We note in Scripture that, “God made promises with his people and through faith, they accepted those promises. Every male underwent circumcision as an outward sign of inward obedience to God’s covenant. In Genesis 17:9-14 we read:

> “Then God said to Abraham, “As for you, you must keep my covenant, you and your descendants after you for the generations to come. **10** This is my covenant with you and your descendants after you,

the covenant you are to keep: Every male among you shall be circumcised. **11** You are to undergo circumcision, and it will be the sign of the covenant between me and you. **12** For the generations to come every male among you who is eight days old must be circumcised, including those born in your household or bought with money from a foreigner—those who are not your offspring. **13** Whether born in your household or bought with your money, they must be circumcised. My covenant in your flesh is to be an everlasting covenant. **14** Any uncircumcised male, who has not been circumcised in the flesh, will be cut off from his people; he has broken my covenant."

Gentiles and foreigners were circumcised whenever they accepted this tradition (Vasa & Vasa 2014: 322). God had ordered Moses and told him to establish this tradition as a testament in the covenant. So, every Israelite of the period of the Old Testament followed the tradition of circumcision ritual as an agreement and as a token to be called as the son of God.

Just as circumcision was the sign of the old covenant, baptism is the sign of the new covenant. In a very real way, what circumcision was to the Old Testament, baptism is for the New Testament but it should be noted that circumcision can never be seen as baptism in the New Testament. There are some fundamental differences between the two. The connection in terms of theological similarities was created by the New Testament writers, for example, in Paul's letter to the Colossians in chapter 2:9-15, we read:

"For in him the whole fullness of deity dwells bodily, and you have been filled in him, who is the head of all rule and authority. In him also you were circumcised with a circumcision made without hands, by putting off the body of the flesh, by the circumcision of Christ, having been buried with him in baptism, in which you were also

> raised with him through faith in the powerful working of God, who raised him from the dead. And you, who were dead in your trespasses and the uncircumcision of your flesh, God made alive together with him, having forgiven us all our trespasses, by cancelling the record of debt that stood against us with its legal demands. This he set aside, nailing it to the cross. He disarmed the rulers and authorities and put them to open shame, by triumphing over them in him."

Paul here tells a body of Gentile believers who have received New Testament baptism that those who are believers have received an internal circumcision. They have a circumcision of the heart, so it is proper and appropriate for them to have the sign of the new covenant, which points beyond itself to all of the benefits of Christ (Sproul 2011: 28). Of course, circumcision and baptism are not identical, just as the old covenant and the new covenant are not identical. The new covenant does not destroy the old covenant; rather, it fulfils and builds upon it.

God's sovereign act is critically important for understanding the significance of baptism. It means that the integrity of the sign does not rest on the person who administers it or on the person who receives it. If someone is baptised by a minister who later leaves the ministry and abandons the faith, that person does not need to be baptised again. Likewise, the failure of the one who is baptised to lead an exemplary life does not undermine the sign. The integrity of the sign rests upon the person whose promise it is. God's promises stand behind the sign (Sproul 2011: 30). The sign of the Old Covenant was the literal, exterior circumcision, which is outward in the flesh. It is no longer necessary to be circumcised in the flesh. We are spiritually circumcised. The circumcision of the New Testament is a circumcision of the heart that is not made with hands (Rom. 2:28-29) (Wuori 2019: 54).

It is evident that, in Colossians 2:11-12, we learn that “salvation comes through faith, and also that the rite of circumcision that once signified the benefits of Abraham’s covenant has been replaced by baptism” (Chappell 2003:17).

As believers, we experience fellowship with both God and with each other in Christ with initiation by baptism into the Christian life. As a result of Christ's finished work on the cross, God now makes his permanent residence in the believer's heart (Jn. 14:23). The fellowship that now prevails under the new covenant is nothing less than the vital, spiritual union of the believer with Christ (Jn. 14:20, 21).

2.4. Baptism and repentance

The best-known example of baptism and repentance that we find in the New Testament, is the narratives surrounding John the Baptist. JAT Robinson (1957), in an article published online by Cambridge University Press, maintains that there is an actual historical connection between John the Baptist and the Qumran Community in the manner they dealt with baptism (Robinson 1957: 175). Although similarities exist between the rites of these two communities, the rites at Qumran were repeated washings related to the need for ritual purity and do not seem to have included an initiatory baptism (Pelser 1981: 250-251; Mitchell 1995: 246; Bradshaw 2002:59-60).

Although the accounts of the three Synoptic Gospels differ in certain respects, their descriptions of this event are more consistent than divergent. John goes about Judea preaching baptism for repentance from sin, yet he also tells those who receive his baptism that someone mightier than he is coming after him: someone who will baptise with the Holy Spirit (and with fire, according to Matthew and Luke). Jesus comes to be baptised and, according to Matthew, John consents to administer it. After Jesus comes up from the water, the Holy Spirit descends like a dove, and a voice from

heaven announces, “This is my Son.” This event is the source, authorisation, and paradigm for Christian baptism (Jensen 2012: 724).

It is not clear from the New Testament account where John the Baptist came from. John’s interesting appropriation of Isaiah 40:3 has led scholars to wonder where John was raised and if it is possible to conclude that he was raised among the Qumranites, even though scholars are divided on the topic. While the argument cannot be proved that John the Baptist was associated with the Essenes at Qumran, it is generally suggested that he was associated with them (Skinner 2010: 57). Writing his *History of the Jews* in the nineteenth century, Heinrich Graetz, claims that John the Baptist was the Essene who prepared the way of the Lord (1893:145). Charlesworth (1999) is convinced that the similarities between John the Baptist and the Qumranites are too impressive to be dismissed as merely an example of a shared environment. He comments as follows:

> “Long after the discovery of the Dead Sea Scrolls at Qumran in 1947, scholars noted the similarities between certain Qumran texts such as the Rule of the Community and the descriptions of John the Baptiser in the New Testament. Some have argued that John the Baptiser belonged to the Qumran community, based on the observations that he followed an ascetic programme similar to theirs in the same period and geographical area near the Dead Sea. We are told in Mark 1:6 that John ate only wild honey and locusts and wore a garment of camel’s hair. We know that these were foods allowed by the Jewish laws enforced at Qumran; moreover, they make the most sense if we assume that John had made the Qumran vow not to receive food or clothing from those outside the group (Rule of the Community 5.16). John the Baptiser and the Qumran community also both used apocalyptic language—images and

ideas about the end of the present age in the context of divine judgment." (Charlesworth 1999: 356)

He then gives five "striking points of similarity", which are as follows:

- Both John and the Qumranites come from similar geographical locations.
- They both share a preference for prophecy, especially Isaiah.
- They both used water as a means of expiation.
- Both were eschatological.
- Both were ascetic and even celibate.

On the other hand, John's baptism had to do with repentance - it was a symbolic representation of changing one's mind and going in a new direction. "Confessing their sins, they were baptised by him in the Jordan River" (Matthew 3:6).

Furthermore, Christ's message of repentance, as noted in Mark 1:15, is linked with faith: "repent and believe in the gospel." Nicodemus, the Jewish leader who came to Jesus by night, was given two very urgent words: "Unless one is born again, he cannot see the kingdom of God," and "Unless one is born of water and the Spirit, he cannot enter into the kingdom of God" (John 3:3, 5). While kingdom citizenship is the result of a second birth, all citizens must live in repentance and faith. It must also be noted that repentance is not the entry ticket into the kingdom of God, but it is a condition of citizenship (Roberts 2002: 397).

This, for John, was a symbol of purification. He washed his followers with water, which symbolised the purified state that they entered into through repentance. The most important part of this baptism according to John the Baptist was not the symbol of water, but the separation from sin and the

entrance into God's realm, with a repentant heart, into the hope of the coming Messiah (Wuori 2019: 178).

2.5. Baptism in the New Testament

Several baptisms are mentioned in the New Testament and a failure to distinguish between these various baptisms will only lead to confusion of thought, for each baptism has its particular spiritual significance. The different baptisms described in the New Testament are those of John the Baptist, the baptism of Jesus and the baptism of the early Church as described in the New Testament and early Christian literature.

John the Baptist baptised in the wilderness, and preached the baptism of repentance for the remission of sins." (Mark 1:4) he further says; "I indeed baptise you with water unto repentance: but He that cometh after me is mightier than I, whose shoes I am not worthy to bear: He shall baptise you with the Holy Ghost and with fire." (Matt. 3:11).

Baptism did not originate with Christianity. Before the dawn of the Christian era, there was a form of baptism practised by the Jews which was known as "Proselyte baptism." It was performed on Gentiles who became converts to Judaism. After suitable instruction as to what was involved in making this great change, the convert was prepared for the actual ceremony that marked his transition from Gentile to Jew. The ceremony took place in three stages. First, there was *milan* or circumcision. The second was *tebillah* or baptism by immersion in water. As the convert stepped out of the water he was called by the rabbis a little child just born anew. He was told that his past life was as completely gone as though he had died and had been buried. The third stage was called *corban* or sacrifice. An animal was sacrificed and some of its blood was sprinkled upon him (Gibbs 2012: 385 of 3869).

When John the Baptist “came into all the country about Jordan, preaching the baptism of repentance for the remission of sins,” the people were left in no doubt that their submission to this rite of baptism marked a transition in their lives, for, in so doing, they “justified God, being baptised with the baptism of John” (Luke 3:3; 7:29). All who submitted to this baptism confessed, in so doing, that they repented of their sinfulness of the past, and acknowledged they were worthy only of death, of which this baptism was, to them, a picture.

Jesus submitted Himself to this baptism, not because of any necessity on His part, for He was sinless. Scripture bears testimony to the fact that He was without sin, that He knew no sin, and that He did no sin. (Heb. 4:15). By submitting to John’s baptism in the river Jordan, and this over John’s strenuous objections, our Lord thus “fulfilled all righteousness.” By this act, Christ not only placed His seal of approval on John’s ministry, but He also identified Himself with the godly remnant of Israel. (Matt. 3:13-17). In the Heidelberg Catechism, the baptism of Jesus is regarded not as a cleansing ritual, but rather as an anointment to the messianic offices of priests, prophets and kings.

n the Roman Catholic Church, after the baptism comes the anointing with sacred chrism oil, wherein the priest or deacon prays these words, “As Christ was anointed Priest, Prophet, and King, so may you live always as a member of his body, sharing everlasting life. We are called as a community of faith, to embrace these shared offices of priest, prophet, and king.”

Baptism makes us members of the body of Christ, “to be a holy priesthood” (1 Peter 2:5). By baptism, we share in the priesthood of Christ, in his prophetic and royal mission. We are “a chosen race, a royal priesthood, a holy nation, God’s people …” (1 Peter 2:9).

One of the transformational calls that the Methodist Church is proud of is the belief in the priesthood of all believers, where everyone is given the role of sharing this sacred responsibility. This anointing is a stirring reminder of the transcendent dignity conferred on us. By priesthood, both clergy and laity are called to offer and consecrate the bread and wine on behalf of those gathered and to actively participate by offering themselves, their gifts and sacrifices to God respectively.

Second, as prophets and kings, Jesus, the king of heaven, gave his life to conquer sin and death, to bring resurrection and new life. This implies that humanity has been given the greatest task of being part of the “project salvation”.

Jesus said; “I have a baptism to be baptised with; and now am I straitened till it is accomplished!” In these words, Jesus referred symbolically to the substitutionary sufferings and death which he was to accomplish on the cross. He anticipated the moment when, in infinite grace, He was to assume the awful liability of our sins and endure, at the hands of the Holy God, all the judgment that was their due. The dreadful storm of the righteous wrath of God was to break, in all its concentrated fury, upon His holy, spotless soul until all grounds of condemnation against the believer’s sins was forever past, and all the work needed for the salvation of every believing sinner had been accomplished to God’s complete satisfaction. He knew all that this involved in the way of suffering, yet He allowed nothing and no one to turn Him aside from the path that led to that “hill, lone and grey,” where He was to be forsaken of his God and die, in ignominy and shame, that we might be saved by God’s grace” (Gibbs 2012: 432 of 3869). This was a baptism that only the Son of God could experience. There was no other one who could share the cup of suffering from Him, He must go through it all alone by His baptism unto death, our blessed Lord has both satisfied all the claims of righteous law and met all the holy demands of divine justice on the behalf

of all who will trust in His accomplished redemption, receive Him as their own personal Saviour and confess Him as the Lord of their life. The anointing of Christ implies that as we share in Jesus' Priesthood, Prophecy and kingship, we are also covered in his anointing.

In trying to understand baptism in the New Testament, we need to deal with what it means to be "baptised into Christ." Romans 6:3 comes to mind: "Or don't you know that all of us who were baptised into Christ Jesus were baptised into his death?"

As Christians, we share in the death and resurrection of Christ through union with him and this comes about by the baptising work of the Spirit, "For by one Spirit are we all baptised into one body, whether we are Jews or Gentiles, whether we are bond or free; and have been all made to drink into one Spirit" (1 Cor. 12:13). At the moment of believing in Christ, we get baptised in the spirit - "For as, many of you as have been baptised into Christ have put on Christ" (Gal 3:27). The moment one believes in Christ, the Holy Spirit identifies that person with Christ and puts the person in union with Christ so that they become one with Christ. They become one spirit with the Lord: "But he that is joined unto the Lord is one spirit" (1 Cor. 6:17).

However, it must be noted that God does not depend on some ritual to acknowledge and recognise us. We are all God's children (1 John 3:1-13). In Galatians 3:26-28, we get an insight into the phrase "in Christ" and what it means. "In Christ Jesus, we are all children of God through faith, for all of us who were baptised into Christ have clothed yourselves with Christ. In this passage, it is clear that by baptism, we are made to be in union with Christ. But this does not mean that baptism is the only way into being in union with Christ as to be "in Christ" also it means "we have accepted Christ's sacrifice as payment for our own sin". Furthermore, "while we were enemies we were reconciled to God by the death of his Son, much more, now that we are

reconciled, shall we be saved by his life." (Rom 5:10). This proves that being in Christ does not need one to undergo some religious ritual.

In the book of Acts (19:1-6) we have an incident where some of John's disciples, after hearing the gospel, were baptised again, this time into Christ; after which they received the Holy Spirit:

> "Paul, having passed through the upper regions, came to Ephesus. And finding some disciples[2]he said to them, 'Did you receive the holy Spirit when you believed?' So they said to him, 'We have not so much as heard whether there is a holy Spirit.' And he said to them, 'Into what then were you baptised?' So they said, 'Into John's baptism.' Then Paul said, 'John indeed baptised with a baptism of repentance, saying to the people that they should believe on Him who would come after him, that is, on Christ Jesus.' When they heard this, they were baptised in the name of the Lord Jesus. And when Paul had laid hands on them, the holy Spirit came upon them, and they spoke with tongues and prophesied. Now the men were about twelve in all."

Dagmar Heller (2012), of the Bossey Institute of the WCC, asserts that "through our common baptism, Christians are brought into union with Christ, with each other and with the Church of every time and place which further unites us to Christ in faith, is thus a basic bond of unity. In the Roman Catholic teaching, the Church is understood as a mystery, this mystery is in the first place not described as the body of Christ, but as the people of God: Hence, the Church has been seen as 'a people made one with the unity of the Father, the Son and the Holy Spirit".

The image of the body of Christ is one of several biblical images for the Church and is therefore explained together with other biblical images with the focus of the believers "being moulded in the likeness of him". What is important, is that by communicating his Spirit, Christ made his brothers,

called together from all nations, mystically the components of his own body. The Church is the mystical body of Christ, created by the Spirit. However, a Protestant's answer to the question "*what is the Church?*" is a bit more difficult, because there is not just one dogma. The body of Christ is just an image, which has the function to illustrate Paul's concern about the life of a community.

Other Protestant theologians emphasise more the fact that the Church is the body of Christ, without explaining though, how this has to be understood. According to Henry Cook (1953: 31-35), "the body of Christ is understood as a picture of the Church in order to show, that the members with different functions are kept in unity through the personality that indwells it, co-ordinating, directing and using all the varied members for the fulfilment of the one definite end it sets before itself."

John the Baptist referred to this when he said: "I indeed baptise you with water unto repentance, but He that comes after me shall baptise you with the Holy Spirit and with fire" (Lk. 3:16). After His resurrection, and just before His ascension, our Lord confirmed this prophecy and said to His disciples: "You shall be baptised with the Holy Spirit, not many days hence" (Acts 1:5). This baptism took place when "the day of Pentecost was fully come with the sound as of a rushing mighty wind." The Holy Spirit came and baptised the assembled believers and united them together into one organism, the mystical body of Christ. (Acts 2:1–4) By the term "the mystical body of Christ," is meant the Church, which is formed of the total of all believers from Pentecost to the Rapture. One of the most striking of the many metaphors of the Church in the New Testament is that of a human body with its many members which, as we all know, is an organism, or that which is pervaded by a common life. By the term, 'the mystical body of Christ,' we do not mean the actual and literal body of Christ, in which He became incarnate, lived, wrought, taught, suffered, died, rose again and ascended. We mean the

figurative body, of Christ, the Church, of which the Lord Jesus Christ is the sole Head, and of which every believer is a member. (See 1 Cor. 12:12–31) (Gibbs 2012: 495 of 3869). This baptism of the Holy Spirit into the body of Christ took place at Pentecost and is therefore true of all believers. It is never spoken of as being the individual experience of a believer but is always referred to in a collective sense, as is true of all believers.

The individual aspect of the Spirit's work in the believer could be described as a conviction of sin, regeneration, indwelling, sealing, infilling, leading and empowering. Each believer was individually convinced, by the Spirit, of his need as a sinner and, on receiving Christ as his personal Saviour, was regenerated and sealed by the Holy Spirit unto the day of redemption.

"He shall baptise you with the Holy Ghost and with fire: whose fan is in His hand, and He will thoroughly purge His floor, and gather His wheat into His garner; but He will burn up the chaff with unquenchable fire (Matthew 3:11-12)." It is clear, from this statement, that the "baptism of fire" is connected with judgment on the ungodly, or "the chaff." It, therefore, cannot apply to the believer, who has been guaranteed, by his Lord, that "he shall not come into condemnation, but is passed from death unto life." Some Christians, sincerely but mistakenly, believe that this baptism of fire refers to an individual baptism of the Holy Spirit, after regeneration, through which the carnal nature, or the flesh, is completely eradicated in the believer, so that he consequently becomes perfect without sin, and is therefore incapable of sinning. Those sincere Christians, who have agonised in prayer for this "baptism of fire," should be very grateful to God that He did not answer their prayer. If he had, they would now be suffering "the vengeance of eternal fire," from which baptism there is no emergence and no deliverance! This baptism is reserved for those who neglect, reject or despise the Saviour, who provided this great salvation at such an infinite cost (Gibbs 2012: 524 of 3869).

2.6. Concluding remarks

The overview of some relevant material in the Old and New Testaments as presented above leads us to conclude that baptism could be understood as follows:

To be a child of God and carry Jesus' name on the forehead

The seal of God is God's symbol or sign of identification and ownership. Other theologians are of the view that, the mark of Jesus name on our forehead guarantees our eternal safety, which I strongly reject. This is also disputed or rejected by Dr. Gregory Robertson, in his paper, 'Eternal Security: A Biblical and Theological Appraisal' (https://anderson.edu/uploads/sot/eternal-security.pdf)

In Eph. 1: 13 – 14 we read: "And you also were included in Christ when you heard the message of truth, the gospel of your salvation. When you believed, you were marked in him with a seal, the promised Holy Spirit who is a deposit guaranteeing our inheritance until the redemption of those who are God's possession—to the praise of his glory."

When a person is sealed, their identity is now in Christ. This means when God can identify us as God's children. This also protects one from Satan wanting to own you. In the Ephesian passage, the promised Holy Spirit guarantees our inheritance. We become part of the Kingdom inheritance.

To be included in the covenant

In the covenant view, baptism is not a mere symbol. "Spiritual realities occur in conjunction with baptism, but Scripture does not explain in detail how baptism and divine grace are connected" (Armstrong 2007: 61). However, according to Wesley, sacraments are a means of grace. Cullman (1950: 57) thinks that there is a correspondence between Jewish circumcision and

infant baptism in the sense that “Jewish circumcision is reception into the old covenant whereas Christian baptism is reception into the new.”

The NT confirms the connection between circumcision and baptism, as well as the Passover and the Lord’s Supper. Paul shows that the meaning of circumcision and baptism is the same. That unified meaning has to do with the Christian’s spiritual death in Christ and his vivification sealed by Christ’s resurrection. Lensch (2007) formulates as follows:

> “Covenant theologians view baptism as the authoritative seal that displaced circumcision in guaranteeing the terms of the covenant. Baptism, the New Covenant parallel to circumcision, reveals more of what God is saying at the rite of initiation than what the passive object of baptism is testifying. This covenantal perspective of the sacraments easily and expectedly fits the Bible’s emphasis on the sovereignty of the God who is the First Cause in issues of soteriology and ecclesiology. At the same time, the passivity of the recipients of baptism accords with the biblical teaching of recognizing children of believers as covenant members.” (Lensch 2007: 3-6)

To be one with Christ in his death and resurrection

Baptism means participating in the life, death and resurrection of Jesus Christ. Jesus went down into the river Jordan and was baptised in solidarity with sinners to fulfil all righteousness (Matt. 3:15). This baptism led Jesus along the way of the Suffering Servant, made manifest in his sufferings, death and resurrection (Mark 10:38–40, 45). By baptism, Christians are immersed in the liberating death of Christ where their sins are buried, where the “old Adam” is crucified with Christ, and where the power of sin is broken (WCC 1982: 1).

To be part of the Church/body of Christ

Christ constitutes the Church as his Body by the power of the Holy Spirit (1 Cor. 12:13, 27). According to Cullmann (1950), “baptism is incorporation into the Church where Christ is present and where the once-and-for-all saving work of Christ is carried out in all who are responding and where conscious faith is born and communicated”. This means that baptism replaces circumcision as a sign of Christ and his gospel work. He further concluded that both adult and infant baptisms are to be regarded as equally biblical. The essence of the act of baptism is, therefore, the reception of a member into the divine covenant of the body of Christ in whom the covenant with Abraham is fulfilled.” With regard to baptism and the requirement of faith, Cullmann reasoned that “within the mortal life of the person baptised, that is of one who has been received into the Church of Jesus Christ; baptism is the starting point of something that happens” (Cullmann 1950: 46-48).

Furthermore, “baptism is a sign and seal of our common discipleship. Through it, Christians are brought into union with Christ, with each other and with the Church of every time and place. Our common baptism, which unites us to Christ in faith, is thus a basic bond of unity. We are one people and are called to confess and serve one Lord in each place and all the world” (WCC 1982: 2).

Our one baptism into Christ constitutes a call to churches to overcome their divisions and visibly manifest their fellowship.

To receive the Holy Spirit

God bestows upon all baptised persons the anointing and the promise of the Holy Spirit, marks them with a seal and implants in their hearts the first instalment of their inheritance as sons and daughters of God. The Holy Spirit nurtures the life of faith in their hearts until the final deliverance when they

will enter into its full possession, to the praise of the glory of God (see II Cor. 1:21—22; Eph. 1:13-14).

From this we learn that baptism is important, since

- It sets an indelible mark on the recipient as a member of the Church;
- Delivers from the guilt of original sin and of all actual sins committed up to the time of baptism, removes the pollution of sin, though concupiscence remains, and sets man free from eternal punishment and from all positive temporal punishments;
- Works spiritual renewal by the infusion of sanctifying grace and of the supernatural virtues of faith, hope, and love; and
- Incorporates the recipient into the communion of the saints and into the visible Church.

Machinga (2011) formulates the importance of baptism as follows:

> "Baptism recognises a person as a child of God's kingdom and sets his or her feet in the way of salvation. In baptism, God initiates the act of salvation and humans respond to God's activity. Baptism, as a sacrament, is an act of acceptance in which candidates recognise, receive, and begin to participate in the grace-filled life that God offers." (Machinga 2011: 13)

John Wesley taught that baptism is a good gift of God to the Church, a significant part of God's plan of bringing people to salvation. When parents present their children for baptism, they avail those children of God's grace. Wesley argued that participation in the sacrament of baptism is a part of a lifelong process of God working in our lives. Through his teaching on prevenient grace, which we are dealt with in the later chapters, Wesley

emphasised that God's gift, which we receive through baptism, must be responded to in repentance and accepted in faith (Machinga 2011: 17).

A sign of new life and rebirth in Christ

Baptism is a sign of new life through Jesus Christ. It unites the one baptised with Christ and with his people. Furthermore, it is the sacrament of rebirth through which Jesus Christ gives us the divine life of sanctifying grace and joins us to his Mystical Body (Killgallon, Weber, & Ziegmann 1990: 154).

The New Testament liturgies of the Church reveal the meaning of baptism in different images that express the riches of Christ and the gifts of salvation. These images are sometimes linked with the symbolic uses of water in the Old Testament. Baptism is therefore

- "Participation in Christ's death and resurrection (Rom 6:3-5; Col 2:12) this means following in the way of Jesus Christ. Thorough baptism "into Christ", we are united with the Crucified and the Risen Lord" (Thurian 1983: 15). This includes everyone, those who lived before, the present and the future generations.
- Washing away of sin (1Cor. 6::11). Baptism experience provides a new ethical orientation. The baptism administered by John was itself a baptism of repentance for the forgiveness of sins (Mark 1:4). The New Testament underlines the ethical implications of baptism by representing it as an ablution that washes the body with pure water, a cleansing of the heart of all sin, and an act of justification (Heb. 10:22). Thus, those baptised are pardoned, cleansed and sanctified by Christ, and are given as part of their baptismal experience a new ethical orientation under the guidance of the Holy Spirit. The grace received at baptism remedies the 'graceless' condition of the soul called original sin (Killgallon, Weber, & Ziegmann 1990: 155). For

those old enough to have sinned, Jesus also takes away their sins and the punishment due to them when the recipient is properly disposed. This is irrelevant to the dead as no washing or cleansing needs to take place.

- New birth (John 3:5). Baptism, as '*the washing of regeneration*,' "represents the new birth in Christ that is offered and given by the Spirit in the word of reconciliation; and since the new birth is mediated through the Christian community, whose faith is a condition but not the guarantee of faith in the one baptised, baptism is also called "adoption into the family of faith" or "reception into the covenant people." (Gerrish 2015: 259). It initiates the reality of the new life given in the midst of the present world. It gives participation in the community of the Holy Spirit. It is a sign of the Kingdom of God and of the life of the world to come. Through the gifts of faith, hope and love, baptism has a dynamic that embraces the whole of life, extends to all nations, and anticipates the day when every tongue will confess that Jesus Christ is Lord to the glory of God the Father. It creates new opportunities for new beginnings with Christ.
- Enlightenment by Christ (Eph. 5:14); clothing in Christ (Gal. 3:27);
- A renewal by the spirit (Titus 3:5); The Holy Spirit is at work in the lives of people before, in and after their baptism. It is the same Spirit who revealed Jesus as the Son (Mark 1:10-11) and who empowered and united the disciples at Pentecost (Acts 2). "God bestows upon all baptised persons the anointing and the promise of the Holy Spirit, marks them with a seal and implants in their hearts the first instalment of their inheritance as sons and daughters of God. The Holy Spirit nurtures the life of faith in our hearts until the final deliverance when they will enter its full possession, to the praise of the glory of God (2 Cor. 1:21-22; Eph. 1:13-14)" (WCC 1982: 3).

- Incorporation into the Body of Christ Holy Baptism is the seal and sign of our common discipleship. Through it, Christians are brought into union with Christ, with each other and with the Church of every time and place. Our common baptism, which unites us to Christ in faith, is thus a basic bond of unity. We are one people and are called to confess and serve one Lord in each place and all the world. The union with Christ which we share through baptism has important implications for Christian unity. “There is one baptism, one God, and Father of all…”; the experience of salvation from the flood (1Peter 3:20-21); an exodus from bondage (1 Cor. 10:1-2) and a liberation into new humanity in which barriers of division whether of gender, race, or social status are transcended (Gal. 3:27-28; 1 Cor. 12:13) these images are many but the reality is one. Incorporation into the body of Christ encompasses the living as well as the living dead. As Christians, we believe in the resurrection of the body and the life after.

Last, diverse scriptural concepts and metaphors leave no doubt as to the importance of baptism. However, the question remains, whether stillborn children must be baptised to receive eternal life. Are the children of Christian parents lost if they are not baptised? Is baptism a means of grace, or an outward sign of an invisible grace of God? These are the questions theologians through the history of the Church struggled with. Centuries of rites and liturgical practices established certain beliefs amongst Christian folk.

In the next chapter, some of the answers theologians gave in different times and contexts will be discussed.

3. HISTORICAL PERSPECTIVES

3.1. Introduction

In the latter half of the twentieth century, “the world’s major Christian Churches (including Lutheran, Anglican, Presbyterians, Methodists and Roman Catholics) have come together ecumenically in a move toward greater consensus on both interpretation and baptismal practice through conversation about baptism, sharing of rites and its place in the life of the Church” (Bushkofsky & Satterlee 2008: 9).

In 1982, the World Council of Churches created a document entitled *Baptism, Eucharist, and Ministry*. This document declares that “baptism is the one sacrament for which no Church questions the validity of the practices of other Christians” and it agrees with Luther that the “life of baptism also encompasses human response: that baptism is a lifelong process of growth into Christ and that the Christian life involves both struggle and continuing in the experience of God’s grace.” While this document acknowledges both infant and believers’ baptism, it does not resolve the tension between them that has been ongoing for the past 500 years but affirms that both are rooted in the faithfulness of Christ and within the faith community. Looking at the history of Christianity, one is struck by divergent views and practices in terms of baptism.

In this chapter, some of these divergent views will be discussed. Important theologians in history will be invited into the conversation, to enrich our understanding of baptism and how it developed through history.

3.2. Early Christianity

Most historians of early Christianity agree that children were not baptised in infancy. Joachim Jeremias (1960: 87-91) describes the postponement of children's baptism by Christian parents as a “crisis”, but this is no neutral

description of what happened. Anyone writing on this subject at the end of the second Christian millennium inherits the weight of decades of earlier debate, whose formulations almost inescapably condition the terms in which they have to discuss it.

The postponement of baptism led to generations of children who did not receive any ecclesial recognition. They were left in a vacuum caused by the postponement of baptism. They suffered from baptismal deprivation (Porter & Cross 1999: 352). Despite this, many of them turned out remarkably well. They became famous theologians, bishops and monastic leaders during 'the golden age of the Church Fathers' (Danielou & Marrou 1964). Nor did they find fault with their godly parents for not having had them baptised at birth, nor even demonstrate the awareness that their parents had not done something that they might have done— no awareness, that is, that there had been a baptism available to them at their parents' discretion (Porter & Cross 1999: 35).

The most basic tenets of the Christian faith found expression in the act of baptism, as the latter was not only an act of faith but embodied faith. A period of instruction, especially about the moral implications for the Christian life, preceded baptism.

A preparatory time of prayer and fasting enhanced the seriousness of the occasion. An administrator and some witnesses were present, but not necessarily the whole community. During the act of baptism, the pronouncement of the Holy Trinity ("Father, Son, and Holy Spirit") as in Matthew 28:19 was used.

> “References to baptism in the name of Christ characterise the baptism as Christian baptism or refer to the confession of faith made by the candidate at his baptism. The confession of faith in Christ was a critical feature of the baptism and is intimately bound up with all descriptions

of baptism and accounts of the meaning of baptism." (Ferguson 1999: 32)

This situation was especially true in the context of mission and large numbers of adults who converted to Christianity. As for those who were baptised, faith was a necessary prerequisite to receiving baptism. Baptism was administered to those who "are persuaded and believe", and they are baptised in a spirit of reverence and trust. Furthermore, it was also believed that not only was baptism connected with the faith and repentance of the candidate but it was also connected with the cross of Jesus.

In Romans 6:3 Paul writes: "Or don't you know that all of us who were baptised into Christ Jesus were baptised into his death?" This is the oldest written evidence of Christian baptism. The Acts of the Apostles was written much later than the book of Romans, but the author seems to have made use of an early source in his account of Pentecost. According to this, all the converts were baptised. When Philip preached in Samaria, those who repented were baptised. Paul's converts at Corinth and Ephesus were baptised as soon as they were known to recognise Jesus Christ as Messiah. Paul makes his fullest reference to baptism in Romans, written before he had ever seen Rome, to a Christian community that was thoroughly conversant with normal practices and traditions. The evidence is fairly conclusive that the rite was in universal use among the various Christian communities (Stephenson 1919: 115).

The question is, why did this custom come into such general use? One answer is that in the religions during the first century CE, symbolic religious cleansing was known and practised widely. The Jews made frequent use of water and cleansing rites and the Essenes considered baptism essential to salvation. Proselytes were baptised when admitted to the commonwealth of Israel as a means of cleansing from the defilement of Gentile practices. As

the earliest Christians were nearly all Jews it would seem very natural for them to adopt the custom from their people.

A second answer could be found in the respect early Christians had for John the Baptist. Preceding the appearance of Jesus, John proclaimed the quick coming of the kingdom and offered a "baptism for the remission of sins" as a preparation for entrance into the perfect life of the new era (Stephenson 1919: 116).

There were different forms of baptism in use by the end of the first century. The form of baptism varied according to local or special conditions. The common feature in baptism was the use of water in a cleansing and initiation rite. Immediately after the baptism, the candidate was admitted to full membership in the Christian communion. Normally no catechesis was imposed after baptism because in most instances catechesis was passed through before the candidate presented her - or himself for baptism (Stephenson 1919: 117). With regards to mystagogical catechesis, the meaning of the Sacraments was explained to those who have newly received them.

The unique element in Christian baptism was the addition of the "name of Jesus." John used no ritualistic formula at all, the baptism being for the remission of sins. It admitted the candidate to no new order or community, but simply assured the person of fitness for God's kingdom when it came. Christian baptism, therefore, meant immediate membership in the Ecclesia, the Kingdom of God on earth, and as this was through the recognition of Jesus as the Messiah or Lord, the rite was performed in Jesus' name. By the confession of Jesus in baptism the convert passed over immediately into membership of the Church. This rite gives a person a valid status in the eyes of their brethren and their own eyes as a regular member of the Ecclesia, with all privileges and duties attaching thereto. Henceforth, the person is

known as one justified, or in conscious favour with God, a 'saint' consecrated to their ends, the ends of the kingdom (Stephenson 1919: 194).

Discussion regarding the nature of Christian rites occurred as early as the beginning of the second century in writings such as the *Didache* (Carrington 1957: 483-501), and the works of Irenaeus.

Scholars agree that it was only with Tertullian that the term "sacrament" entered Christian theology. Tertullian exploits the theological significance of the parallel between the sacraments and military oaths. Just as the *Sacramentum* was a sign of allegiance and loyalty to the Roman Emperor, the sacraments point to commitment and loyalty within the Church. Most importantly, however, Tertullian appears to be the first Christian thinker to identify the Latin *Sacramentum* with the Greek *mysterion,* though in the New Testament *mysterion* is used specifically concerning the saving work of God (Bornkamm 1967: 822) and is never applied to such rites as the Lord's Supper or baptism.

Cyprian, Tertullian's most influential pupil, contributed to the development of sacramental theology by developing the notion of sacramental efficacy, a theme later expanded in the writings of Augustine. Cyprian argued that no true sacraments could exist outside of the Church, therefore no salvation is to be found outside of the Church (Kallistos 1993: 247-248). This connected the sacraments to salvation.

The early fathers regarded baptism as the rite of initiation into the Church and usually considered it as closely connected with the forgiveness of sins and the communication of the new life. Some of their expressions would seem to indicate that they believed in baptismal regeneration. (Berkhof 1949: 535). At the same time, it should be noted that in the case of adults they did not regard baptism as efficacious apart from the right disposition of the soul, and they did not consider baptism as essential to the initiation of

the new life, but rather looked upon it as the completing element in the process of renewal (Berkhof 1949: 693).

In a later edition, Berkhof says the following: Infant baptism was already current in the days of Origen and Tertullian, though the latter discouraged it on the grounds of expediency. The general opinion was that baptism should never be repeated, but there was no unanimity as to the validity of baptism administered by heretics. In course of time, however, it became a fixed principle not to re-baptise those who were baptised into the name of the triune God. The mode of baptism was not in dispute.

From the second century on the idea gradually gained ground that baptism works more or less magically. Even Augustine seems to have considered baptism as effective openness in the case of children. He regarded baptism as necessary and held that unbaptised children are lost … According to him baptism cancels original guilt but does not wholly remove the corruption of nature. The Scholastics at first shared Augustine's view, that in the case of adult's baptism presupposes faith, but gradually another idea gained the upper hand, namely, that baptism is in itself effective - *ex opere operato, that is* - "from the work performed" and, in reference to sacraments, signifies that they derive their efficacy, not from the minister or recipient (https://www.definitions.net/definition/ex+opere+operato). The importance of subjective conditions was minimized. Thus the characteristic Roman Catholic conception of the sacrament, according to which baptism is the sacrament of regeneration and of initiation into the Church, gradually gained the upper hand. It contains the grace which it signifies and confers this on all those who put no obstacle in the way. This grace was regarded as very important (Berkhof 2017: 488).

3.3. Augustine

Aurelius Augustinus, usually known as “Augustine of Hippo,” is the greatest and most influential mind of the Christian Church throughout its long history. He was attracted to the Christian faith by the preaching of Bishop Ambrose of Milan. He was made bishop of Hippo in 395.

In the remaining 35 years of his life, he witnessed numerous controversies of major importance to the future of the Christian Church in the west, and his contribution to the resolution of each of these was decisive. His careful exposition of the New Testament, particularly the letters of Paul, gained him a reputation which continues today, as the “second founder of the Christian faith. A major part of Augustine’s contribution lies in the development of theology as an academic discipline and he made key contributions to three major areas of Christian theology, the doctrine of the Church and sacraments, arising from the Donatist controversy” (McGrath 2015: 12).

The other two major areas to which Augustine made a substantial contribution, are the doctrine of the Trinity and last, God’s grace and our salvation. Augustine maintained that the Church was a mixed body that penetrated society as a whole. All Christians were bound together by their participation in the sacraments and shared in holiness because they were united to Christ. So, baptism derived its validity not from the moral or spiritual health of the priest who administered the sacraments (as with the Donatists), but from Christ. The sacraments are endowed with a power drawn from Christ, independent of the disposition of the priest. As Augustine famously wrote: ‘‘The Word (of Christ) comes to the element (the water) and it becomes the sacrament’’ (Wilken 2012: 187). Augustine says the following of the sacraments (in Hellmann 2016):

> “What is the power of the water that it should touch the body and cleanse the heart? Therefore, there is some power in the sacrament

> by which the heart is cleansed; therefore, it is spiritual power. Again, we see that the works of divine justice happen through the ministry of corporeal created things. These have from God some power through which they can act upon the soul. In terms of baptism, if some contrite person approaches Baptism, even though no grace is conferred upon him because he already possesses it, nevertheless there is conferred upon him the remission of all punishment, which he did not previously possess … If the divine institution is more powerful than a human, and the sacraments are signs by divine institution, then they can give rise in us to a much more noble effect. Therefore, they can effect grace." (Hellmann 2016: 61-66)

The Donatists taught that baptism and ordination - administered by morally unworthy persons specifically, priests who had lapsed into paganism during the Diocletian persecution - had no validity.

Augustine insisted, and the medieval Church always agreed, that gross immorality on the part of a priest did not minimise the efficacy of the Church's sacraments; to believe otherwise was to permit human weakness to impede the work of God. Later Scholastics described the sacraments as working *ex opere operato*, that is, simply by their objective performance, not *ex opere operantis*, because of the personal character or contribution of the agent who performed them (Ozment 1981: 28). Ozment (1981) formulates as follows:

According to the orthodox teaching of the medieval Church, three things were required to make fallen man righteous again: an infusion of healing grace, and this meant direct reliance on the Church and its sacraments, which formed the narrow gate to salvation; the free turning of the will to God and away from sin, or ethical cooperation with grace; and the remission of

the guilt incurred by sin by priestly absolution. The sacraments of baptism and penance were basic to this process of religious restoration. The grace of baptism was believed to neutralise the individual's responsibility for original sin (washes away the whole guilt of punishment belonging to the past), while the grace of penance gave aid against persisting actual sins (a sacramental cure which purges us from sin after baptism). The Church baptised infants to remove the guilt and penalty they automatically incurred as offspring of Adam. Baptism and last rites were the two sacraments medieval men and women did not neglect, even those who in most other respects appear to have been religiously indifferent Baptism was believed not only to remove original sin but also to destroy any actual sins present at the time and to weaken the inclination to sin that remained in the baptised. The latter, known as the *fomes peccati*, or "tinderbox" of sin, was an inherent weakness of all people after the Fall. In time everyone, including the baptised, succumbed to the human inclination to sin. Hence, all needed recourse to what medieval theologians called the 'second plank after shipwreck,' the sacrament of penance … No more than baptism, however, was penance a definitive resolution of man's sinful state. Through the sacrament of penance one again received healing grace, which destroyed the sin immediately present and weakened, but again did not remove, the inclination to sin in the future. The penitent, like the baptised, soon succumbed to the temptation to sin and found himself, if earnest, returning to the sacrament of penance in what became a recurring cycle of sin and absolution. In practice, a sense of steady moral improvement and a gradual approximation of that ordered obedience to God that marked the life of Adam before the Fall should result from such religious activity. But in theological doctrine the medieval Christian was always sinning, always beginning anew and always returning to the sacraments for short-lived strength and assurance (Ozment 1981: 30).

For Augustine, the spiritual Church was a subset of the physical Church, made up of the baptised, but those outside of the larger group could never be saved. Baptism was necessary to remove the inherited original sin of the infant, and increasingly, he stressed that without baptism souls were condemned to hell-fire. In both the eastern and western Churches there was often the damnation that awaited the unbaptised, and its logical corollary, that many unbaptised infants were doomed to eternal torment, was also an inference that many struggled to accept.

> "At the same time, Augustine was convinced that we are totally dependent upon God for our salvation, from the beginning to the end of our lives. God does not leave us where we are naturally, incapacitated by sin and unable to redeem ourselves, but gives us grace in order that we may be healed, forgiven and restored. His view on human nature is that it is frail, weak, and lost and needs divine assistance and care if it is to be restored and renewed. "Grace, according to Augustine, is God's generous and quite unmerited attention to humanity, by which this process of healing may begin, human nature requires transformation through the grace of God, so generously given." (McGrath 2001: 446)

While it can be seen in Catholic works like those of Gilbert of Nogent as late as the twelfth century, in the fourteenth-century English poem Pearl it was suggested that all infants dying before the age of two should be numbered amongst the 144 000 mentioned in Revelations 7:4. More commonly, in the scheme of the late medieval Catholicism they were assigned, not to Hell, but Limbo, associated in origin with Aquinas and most famously depicted by Dante as filled by the sighs 'unwracked by pain' of 'the great multitude below, of children and women and men ... since baptism was not theirs' (Coster 2016: 49). By the fifteenth century this appears to have become the most widely accepted theological view, but, as will be seen, some elements of the

baptismal rite contradicted this position and it may not have been widely accepted among the population at large.

These same dilemmas continued to echo through the baptismal debate in sixteenth-century England. While Catholics and conservatives wishing to highlight the efficacy of the rite, laid stress on baptism as central to salvation, many reformers saw it as a seal or covenant, promising salvation through future faith. In the established Church of England, baptism was, not 'absolutely', but only 'formally' necessary for salvation. It involved conversion and confession, forgiveness and remission as stated earlier.

3.4. Roman Catholic understanding of baptism

Roman Catholic theology could be described as sacramental theology. This translates into a strong emphasis on sacramental rites and practices. In the Roman tradition, sacraments are important to encounter Christ in His Church, to be strengthened by God's grace, and to experience His Spirit.

Roman Catholics, in general, believe that baptism is necessary for salvation. This is followed by the sacrament of penance for those who have committed mortal sins after baptism. On the other hand, the Eucharist is necessary only in the sense that it helps believers on their life journey. The connection between baptism and penance confirms the notion that the unbaptised will not be saved. According to the catechism of the Catholic Church,

Holy Baptism is the basis of the whole Christian life, the gateway to life in the Spirit, and the door which gives access to the other sacraments. Through Baptism they believe that we are freed from sin and reborn as children of God; we become members of the body of Christ, incorporated into the Church and made sharers in her mission. Baptism is the sacrament of regeneration through water in the word (1213). To all the baptised,

children or adults, faith must grow after Baptism, it is for this reason the Church celebrates each year at the Easter Vigil the renewal of baptismal promises. Preparation for Baptism leads only to the threshold of new life, furthermore, baptism is regarded as the source of that new life in Christ from which the entire Christian life springs forth (1254). By Baptism, Catholics believe that all sins are forgiven, original sin and all personal sins, as well as all punishment for sin. In those who have been reborn nothing remains that would impede their entry into the Kingdom of God, neither Adam's sin, nor personal sin, nor the consequences of sin, the gravest of which is separation from God (1263). (https://www.quora.com/Why-dont-Protestants-believe-in-Baptism).

Catholicism believes that baptism not only purifies us from all sins, but also makes the neophyte "a new creature," an adopted son of God, who has become a "partaker of the divine nature," member of Christ and co-heir with him, and a temple of the Holy Spirit, hence the Most Holy Trinity gives the baptised sanctifying grace, the grace of justification:

- Enabling them to believe in God, to hope in him, and to love him through the theological virtues;
- Giving them the power to live and act under the prompting of the Holy Spirit through the gifts of the Holy Spirit;
- Allowing them to grow in goodness through moral virtues.
- Thus the whole organism of the Christian's supernatural life has its roots in Baptism.

Catholics see baptism as the gateway into the people of God, the new Israel, the people on whom God had set his seal. Just as you entered the old Israel by circumcision, so you become a member of the new Israel by baptism. The concluding exhortation of Peter’s sermon on the first Day of Pentecost is a good example. He calls on his hearers to “Save yourselves from this

crooked generation" and we are told that those who received his word were baptised, "about three thousand souls" (Acts 2:40, 41). Peter calls on his hearers to separate themselves from Jewish nominalism and identify themselves with the true Israel of God which had been continuous since Abraham. Paul wrote in the same vein: "As many of you as were baptised into Christ have put on Christ… And if you are Christ's then you are Abraham's offspring, heirs according to promise" (Galatians 3:27, 29).

Sacraments are doors to the sacred; gateways through which humanity can enter more fully into "God's house." Furthermore, the notion that "sacraments are doors suggests that while the sacraments offer them an opportunity to encounter the sacred, as is the case with real doors, they must walk through them to engage in this encounter. The sacraments are not merely statements of what Catholics believe, they are that" (Stasiak 2001: 354). Sacraments make Christian faith "more real". When family and friends gather in the Church to baptise a newborn infant, they do not come together simply to talk about what they believe. They show what they believe by doing it: by taking part in a ritual that goes beyond the mere recital of words and into an engagement with gestures and actions, signs and symbols. By acting out sacramentally what they believe, they are able, at a deeper level, to experience it as well. "The sacramental theology of the Catholic Church maintains that sacraments are visible signs, those rituals or the liturgical celebration: those things they say, hear and do in the Church. There are three things involved in their consideration: the symbols or gestures used and the words spoken; the minister of the sacrament and the recipients of the sacrament. For them they do not receive a sacrament and then walk away. Rather, they receive a sacrament so that they can walk in a different way" (Stasiak 2001: 415).

Sacramental theology and the importance of the sacraments have a very long history in the Roman Catholic Church. As Bornkamm (1967) puts it:

The origin of modem Roman Catholic sacramental theology was developed in the earliest history of the Christian Church. While the New Testament does not utilize the term "sacrament,' some scholars speculate that the post-apostolic Church felt it necessary to bring Christianity into line with other religions of the time, which utilized various "mysterious rites." In addition to the Lord's Supper and baptism, which had always carried special importance, the early Church recognized many rites as 'holy ordinances" (Bornkamm 1967: 824-827).

The word ‘sacrament derives its meaning from the word *sacrare*, which, in turn, points to a person or thing set aside for public authority by divine right (Dulles 1982: 83). Its common usage refers to an act of consecration, to the one performing it, or to the person or thing being consecrated. “The oath of allegiance and loyalty to the Roman Emperor, thus, was considered a *Sacramentum,* as the soldiers dedicated themselves in service to the gods and their divinely instituted representative, the Emperor (Bornkamm 1967: 827).

Schaff (1956) points to the theologians of North Africa as important contributors to the Roman Catholic understanding of the sacraments:

> “In the Christian Church, the most significant development of sacramental theology occurred in Roman North Africa during the third and fourth centuries, especially in the writings of Tertullian, Cyprian of Carthage and Augustine of Hippo. This new terminology was applied especially to the Eucharist and to baptism, of which, according to Cyprian, the bishop was the only celebrant. Augustine was the first Christian theologian to give serious thought to the nature of the sacraments. Without his work, the medieval teaching regarding the sacraments would have been entirely incoherent. Like his predecessors, Augustine's

> sacramental theology is characterized by a certain flexibility that was only exhibited during the era of Scholasticism. As a result, he was willing to ascribe the term "sacrament" to a variety of rites and practices." (see Schaff 1956: Letter 55.1.2)

Jankiewicz (2004) describes Augustine's understanding of the sacraments as follows:

> "He applied the term to the Eucharist, to baptism, and to ordination. Augustine's contribution is twofold. First, he provided a clear definition of the sacraments, which reads: "Symbolical actions pertaining to divine things, are called sacraments or a sacrament is the visible sacrament or sacred sign of an invisible sacrifice. In order to function as sacraments, these "signs" must bear some relation to that which is signified (e.g., wine resembles blood). Secondly, Augustine established a clear distinction between the use of the sacraments and their efficacy … Augustine's views on this matter arose during the Donatist controversy, in which he was deeply involved. Donatists questioned the validity of sacraments performed by heretical schismatic ministers or those whose personal worthiness had been compromised. Thus, they argued, the Eucharist, baptisms, and ordinations performed by such ministers were invalid. A secondary issue was that of the validity of the baptism of someone baptised within a schismatic movement and wishing to join the Catholic Church. Augustine argued against the necessity of rebaptism or re-ordination of heretics or apostates. He based his argument on the concept that each sacrament essentially consisted of two elements: the interior seal conferred by the rite and the grace of God that the seal was to communicate. When one was baptised or ordained, one could receive the seal but not necessarily the grace, which depended on the

recipients' communion with the visible Catholic Church." (Jankiewicz 2004: 361-382)

Furthermore, for them, the symbols and gestures of sacramental celebrations are not in themselves mysterious, and they certainly are not magical. Oil, water, bread and wine and touch - these are among the most basic of human realities. As human beings, they are creatures who communicate largely through symbols. The symbols used most often are words, but these are not the only ones. Their bodies themselves are symbols of who they are, ways through which people encounter their spirit, their soul, and their heart.

These sacraments, instituted by Christ, are among the ways the Church, Christ's Body on Earth, continues the Incarnation—continues to make the love and grace God offered us through Christ more present, more real, to them. Through the sacraments, the divine (Christ's presence) takes on a form they can see and touch (bread and wine). Another way of describing the sacraments, then, is to say that the sacraments bring together the earthly and the divine. Catholic sacramental theology further involves more than "signs," no matter how expressive or sacred they are. *Sacramenta propter homines* - sacraments are for people. This means much more than the fact that they do not administer the sacraments to the dead. It means that the sacraments are for their benefit; as God does not need the sacraments to act on their behalf. Their celebration of the sacraments does not allow God to do something that otherwise God would not be able to do. Rather, the celebration helps them to understand and experience what is it that God is offering them? (Stasiak 2001: 465).

In the development of sacramental theology, a school of thought developed which taught that the sacraments are more than signs; they are the means of grace and the sacrament confers grace "on its own", *ex opere operato*.

According to the *ex opere operato* interpretation of the sacraments, any positive effect the sacraments have does not come from the participants' worthiness or faith, but from the sacrament itself as an instrument of God. The Roman Catholic Church understood baptism as the automatic conferment of forgiveness and salvation. Sacraments became an essential part of salvation. The implication of such an understanding of the sacraments is simply that the unbaptised would not be part of God's kingdom. In terms of the unbaptised children who die prematurely or before they could be baptised, it would mean exclusion from God's grace. This perception could convince parents that the baptism of stillborn babies is necessary. The only other way around this issue is if it is maintained that babies and young children are without sin, and do not need to be baptised to be saved.

The belief that the dead should participate in the sacraments also manifested in rites where the dead were included. Brink and Green (2008) describe it as follows:

> "In the Roman world, even among Christians, Roman tombs were gathering places for the living as well as for the dead. Family members and friends came to graves at regular intervals to honour the departed by sharing a meal with them. Gradually the tradition of eating a meal with the dead was also transformed into the practice of celebrating a Eucharist at an ordinary funeral. First at the tomb, then at the altar, the Church family gathered to hear the tales of heroism and to eat a meal – celebrating the lives of their spiritual as well as blood ancestors." (Brink & Green 2008: 107)

These rites and practices remind one of the ways traditional African people still live. Ancestral celebrations include dining with the ancestors, but this does not happen at the cemetery – ancestors get invited to come to their

earthly house where they used to stay and be part of the celebrations. It is interesting that, up until now, funerals and food are a natural combination.

The time and mode of baptism are important, but they are not as important as the nature and efficacy of baptism. The nature of baptism is in what it signifies. The efficacy of baptism is the power to produce what it signifies. When we are not careful, we will distort regeneration, which is one of the things baptism is supposed to signify. We must be aware that, although baptism signifies regeneration, it is not regeneration.

The *ex opere operato* understanding of the sacraments was criticised severely by Lutheran and Reformed theologians. It could be summarised as follows:

James Brown, in his paper on 'the efficacy of baptism', asserts that, what baptism is signifying is God's grace and not our response as an effectual means to this grace. Baptism is a response to grace and not a channel to it. Certainly, god's grace is not void of faith and works, but the implication in baptism is that faith and works proceed from god's action rather than god's action proceeding from our faith and works. He further states that baptism signifies god's action in giving and our receiving the promises as articulated in the word. Although there is an outward and inward part to the sacraments, we must maintain that the outward is a sign to the party baptised of god's grace and the inward and spiritual grace is that which is signified in baptism. (see https://www.reformedholytrinity.org/blog/the-efficacy-of-baptism)

During the 16th century, the so-called "Protestants" protested against the Roman Catholic understanding of sacraments, especially the concept of *ex opera operato.* The term "Protestant" is not in tension with the idea of being "catholic." The orthographical distinction between "catholic" and "Catholic" is of critical importance. To be "Catholic" is to be "catholic" in a particular

way, which Protestants reject. Anglican and Lutheran writers, for example, place special emphasis on their continuity with the life and thought of the early Church and affirm their “catholic” credentials. Similarly, in 1536 John Calvin, the reformer of the city of Geneva, vigorously defended the Reformation against the charge that it had no place for the patristic heritage. The term “Protestant” therefore, refers to those Churches whose historical origins are to be traced back to the divisions that opened up in the sixteenth century (McGrath 2015: 205).

Protestants (Lutheran, Reformed and Anglican) offer baptism to infants who are too young to confess the Christian faith. This serves to distinguish them from Baptists, who hold that baptism should be administered only to those who are already believing Christians. Evangelicalism is now a major influence within most mainline Protestant denominations in the English-speaking West, although until relatively recently its influence has been significantly smaller in continental Europe. Several independent Churches have now sprung up with a distinctively evangelical ethos, especially in South America and Southern Africa. The charismatic movement has also been of significance in the life of many mainline Protestant Churches, and its influence has also been felt in Catholicism. Many specifically charismatic denominations (such as the Assemblies of God) are now of growing importance in global Protestantism (McGrath 2015: 205).

Protestants teaches that the sacraments are not necessary unto salvation, but are obligatory given the divine precept. They maintain that wilful neglect of their use results in spiritual impoverishment and has a destructive tendency, just as all wilful and persistent disobedience to God has. That they are not necessary unto salvation, follows from:

- The free spiritual character of the gospel dispensation, in which God does not bind His grace to the use of certain external forms, John 4:21,23; Luke 18:14
- The fact that Scripture mentions only faith as the instrumental condition of salvation, John 5:24; 6;29; 3:36; Acts 16:31
- The fact that the sacraments do not originate faith but presuppose it, and are administered where faith is assumed, Acts 2:41; 16:14-15, 30, 33; 1 Cor. 11:23-32 and
- The fact that many were saved without the use of the sacraments. Think of the believers before the time of Abraham and the penitent thief on the cross. (https://ccel.org/ccel/berkhof/systematictheology.vii.ii.iii.html#:~:text=Roman%20Catholics%20hold,on%20the%20cross)

Furthermore, Protestantism sees the profession of faith as a seal on baptism and the Church as the company of believers. Therefore, the answer to the Philippian gaoler's question "What must I do to be saved?" is inevitably "Believe in the Lord Jesus and you will be saved" (Acts 16:31). This view is widely represented in the Protestant denominations throughout the world. But, as the very variety of those denominations demonstrates, this view, while strong on personal response, is weak on corporate solidarity. When you see the Church as simply the body of explicit believers, you run into problems. What are you to make of the very young, or those who for one reason or another are unable to grasp the meaning of the gospel? Can they not be members of his Church? (Green 2017: 115).

3.5. Luther's understanding of baptism

Among Martin Luther's greatest contributions to the world is how the washing of water in the name of the Triune God, amid the gathered Christian assembly, is at the heart of one's entire life as a Christian. It was never

Luther's intention to start such a large-scale Reformation, but it was clear to him that change in the Church was desperately needed for the faith of the German Christians, whom he felt were being abused and neglected by the unethical and tyrannical practices of the Roman Catholic Church at the beginning of the sixteenth century. A review of Luther's theological writings on baptism from 1519 to 1530 demonstrated the growth and change of his baptismal theology and the legacy that continues even today (Bushkofsky & Satterlee 2008: 4)

Brecht (1985: 358) points out that baptism was not on Luther's radar before 1519. After writing the Ninety-Five Theses in 1517, his main focus was on faith and salvation. However, very shortly the conflict with the Roman Catholic Church turned to the understanding of the sacraments. Luther addressed the issue of sacraments and baptism in his sermons. He published three sermons at the end of 1519 on penance, baptism and the Eucharist (or Sacrament of the Altar). Dirk Lange argues, in his introduction to this sermon in the *Annotated Luther Volume I,* that

> "Luther develops here his baptismal theology that undergirds his understanding of the forgiveness of sins and the implications, throughout the life of a Christian, of practising penance. In the *Sermon on Baptism*, Luther drew on Augustine to distinguish between the visible sign of baptism and its significance. However, Luther added the third element to baptism – faith – which played a vital role in joining the sign and its meaning together. Luther had already introduced faith, which is the human experience through the action of the sacraments, in his sermon on penance and in this sermon. Now, however, he dives even further into the centrality of faith in baptism. Luther reclaims Augustine's understanding that baptism does not remove sin but forgives it: for Luther, this broke apart the framework of the medieval Church regarding baptism and penance – baptism's work of

> forgiveness and new life remains forever and not simply that original sin is washed away restoring the sinner to a condition of grace." (Lange 2015: 203)

Luther followed up the *Sermon on Baptism* with the address to the Christian Nobility concerning the improvement of the Christian Estate, published shortly before the Babylonian Captivity. In this lengthy treatise, he included a section on baptism in which he emphasised the link between baptism, grace and faith, citing 1 Cor. 12:12-13, saying that because we are all of one body "we all have one baptism, one gospel and one faith and are all Christians alike; for baptism, gospel and faith alone make us spiritual and a Christian people" (see Estes 2015: 382). Oberman (1989) states that for Luther, baptism is the visible sign of unmerited justification through God's grace, and everyone who has been baptised had thus been consecrated a priest, bishop and pope (Oberman 1989: 227).

Wengert argues that "baptism which was a relatively neglected sacrament in the late-medieval theology, illustrated to Luther the perfection of justification by faith alone" (Wengert 2009: 100). In his *Sermon on Baptism,* published in 1519 (see Horsch 2015), he gives this definition: "Baptism is an outward sign or watchword which distinguishes us from all unbaptised men and marks us a people of Christ, our leader, under whose banner we continually strive against sin." In this sermon, Luther describes baptism as "a covenant or vow." He says: "therefore, it is true that there is no higher, better, greater vow than the vow of baptism, for nothing greater can be vowed than to shun all sin, to die to it" etc. "The sacrament or sign of baptism is quickly administered, as we see before our eyes; but the meaning, the spiritual baptism, the drowning of sin, continues while we live." "In no other sense is man-made pure in baptism, than that a beginning is made toward this end, and of this, he has [in baptism] a sign and covenant and he is to become more and more pure" (see Horsch 2015:10-12). The doctrine of

regeneration through baptism is expressly denied in this sermon. Unless that which is symbolised in baptism is also carried out in practical life, says Luther, “there remains the old man, as formerly”.

The Lutheran reformers, in their first period, advocated the Voluntary Principle; they taught emphatically that Scriptures are the only rightful authority in matters of faith and practice, and held that “the sacraments are signs and seals which do nothing of themselves.” After a few years of reformatory endeavours, Luther and his friends again accepted the doctrine of regeneration through baptism. This means that “regeneration can never be obtained by anything man can do. Jesus said; ‘I give unto them eternal life and they shall never perish” (Lee 2013: 158). They believed the unbaptised infants to be lost and hence could not dispense with infant baptism. But given the doctrine of justification by faith, for which they stood, they found it difficult to maintain the teaching that infants are saved through the rite of baptism. They resorted to unheard-of arguments for the baptism of infants. At the time when they again accepted the opinion of the saving efficacy of the ordinances, they also modified and changed their position on the Voluntary Principle and the authority of the Scriptures.

In his The Babylonian Captivity of the Church, Luther wanted to restore baptism to its rightful place after its corruption by the Church of Rome. Luther wanted to reinstate what he saw as its necessary basis; that is, ‘the promise’. By believing that baptism saves, the one baptised is saved by his baptism. In his view, the proper recipients of baptism are infants. He made it clear that if baptism had been intended for adults, and adults only and not been intended for infants – it would surely have been corrupted.

Luther saw baptism as the means of salvation – especially infant baptism – as the way to save sinners. The ‘faithful’ would like the idea and believe it. By baptising infants, you save them. He went on to try to argue that this is

taught by Scripture – ‘the promise’ no less - The first thing then we have to notice in baptism is the divine promise, which says: Mark 16:16; ‘He who believes and is baptised shall be saved (Gay 2017: 29).

Luther left no room for doubt about his view. He asserts that faith is necessary if baptism is to be effective. Every infant that is baptised is saved and we should never doubt it. He claims that those who have doubts bring a dreadful consequence upon themselves and the baptised infant. Whatever we do, we must keep trusting ‘the promise’. He believes that, unless this faith exists and is applied, baptism profits us nothing; no, it is hurtful to us, not only at the time when it is received but in the whole course of our afterlife. For unbelief of this kind charges the divine promise with falsehood. And to do this is the greatest of all sins.

> “In light of this, it will come as no surprise to learn that Luther had a word of warning: This believing, this trusting ‘the promise’, is not at all easy: If we attempt this exercise of faith, we shall soon see how difficult a thing it is to believe this divine promise. For human weakness, conscious of its own sinfulness, finds it the most difficult thing in the world to believe that it is saved, or can be saved – and yet, unless it believes this, it cannot be saved, because it does not believe the divine truth which promises salvation. So much so, all necessary steps must be taken to keep ‘the promise’ – and the practice of infant baptism on the basis of ‘the promise’ – fully alive in the minds and hearts of the faithful. Luther deplored laxity in this area: This doctrine ought to have been studiously inculcated upon the people by preaching; this promise ought to have been perpetually reiterated; men ought to have been constantly reminded of their baptism; faith ought to have been called forth and nourished.” (Gay 2017: 32-33).

> “Martin Luther's views concerning baptism and infant baptism are briefly outlined in his small *Catechism,* Question 246, asks who instituted baptism” (Luther 1943:170f). He replies that God himself instituted baptism, for Christ who is God commanded his Church to baptise all nations (Mt 28:18-20). Question 251 of this catechism asks for proof that infants should be baptised as well. He answers that infants should be baptised because they are included in the words 'all nations' (Mt 28:19, Ac 2:38-39). “He goes on to assert the following in the second section of his answer: 'because Holy Baptism is the only means whereby infants who, too must be born again, can ordinarily be regenerated and brought to faith.” (Luther 1943:173)

Shortly before the beginning of the Anabaptist movement, in 1524, the Lutheran reformers of Nuremberg, Andreas Osiander, Dominicus Sleupner and Thomas Venatonus, published a book in which they defined the sacraments as “outward symbols which beautifully set forth the nature and character of evangelical doctrine.” On the issue of baptism, they said: “He who consents to the death of the old man, has already in part mortified his old life. And if he comes to baptism with this conviction, it is as if he were buried. Now where such a mind is associated with baptism, much of the sinful desire has without doubt already ceased.” The authors of this book do not attempt to harmonize the practice of baptising infants with this view of baptism.

Perhaps at no other place the Lutherans favoured the abolition of infant baptism to a greater extent than at Nordlingen in Swabia. Theobald Billican, the Lutheran reformer wrote in 1525 in a book defending the changes which had been recently introduced in the Church, he says; “We baptise infants and we also baptise adults. We comply with the wishes of those who do not desire to have their infants baptised, but we present them to Christ our Mediator and Redeemer by the laying on of hands and the prayer of the

Church. The Council of Carthage (in the fifth century) had decided that it shall be left to the liberty of everyone whether or not they would have infants baptised. This statement shows that the Lutherans of Nordlingen at that time did not defend the practice of infant baptism, but accepted its abandonment as orthodox. A similar position on the point in question was taken by the Lutheran preachers in Silesia (see https://stromata.co/chapter-1-introduction-the-lutheran-reformers-earlier-teaching-on-baptism-and-its-meaning/).

The Lutheran reformation did not entirely rid itself of the Roman Catholic conception of the sacraments. Luther did not regard the water in baptism as common water, but as water which had become, through the Word with its inherent divine power, a gracious water of life, a washing of regeneration. Through this divine efficacy of the Word, the sacrament effects regeneration. In the case of adults, Luther made the effect of baptism dependent on faith in the recipient. Realising that he could not consider it so in the case of children, who cannot exercise faith, he at one time held that God by His prevenient grace works faith in the unconscious child, but later professed ignorance on this point. Lutherans are of the view that, without disputing the work of piety, a person is saved by the grace of God alone which is found in Christ. They believe that faith alone saves but there is always the presence of Christ. For them, faith in Jesus Christ plays a vital role in the salvation of an individual.

3.6. Calvin's understanding of baptism

In his sacramental theology, John Calvin was much in agreement with Luther. Like Luther, he rejected the Roman Catholic notion of the seven sacraments and narrowed their number to two: baptism and the Eucharist. Also, he believed that the sacraments were truly efficacious, although not in the Roman Catholic sense. Rather than being channels of God's grace, the

sacraments strengthened or augmented the faith of the participant? Finally, he agreed with Luther that where there was right preaching of the Word and proper administration of the sacraments, there Christ was present. And wherever Christ was, there his Church was to be found as well. The only real disagreement between Calvin and Luther regarding the sacraments was in the area of the body presence of Christ in the Eucharist. Calvin believed that Christ's body was in heaven and, therefore, Calvin defines baptism as…

> "the sign of the initiation by which we are received into the society of the Church in order that, engrafted to Christ, we may be reckoned among God's children. Moreover, the end for which God has given it (this I have shown to be common to all mysteries) is, first, that it may be conducive to our faith in him; and, secondly, that it may serve the purpose of a confession among men." (Calvin 2011: 568-570)

In Calvin's introduction to the essence of baptism, he still regarded the sacrament as an instrument by which God nourishes and confirms faith and efficaciously carries out what is symbolised there. However, his "doctrine of infant baptism is not developed upon the basis of such affirmations. The real point of departure is the insight that infants are among the elect by being the children of believers." For Calvin, the regeneration that is signified and sealed at the baptism of an infant is already bestowed before the administration of the sacrament and continues throughout the person's life - all because of their election.

In 1993, Brian Gerrish suggested that over a lifetime of debate with Roman Catholics, Zwingli and Anabaptists, Calvin fashioned a doctrine of infant baptism with benefits in three tenses: "Christian children are baptised in recognition that they were already adopted by God before they were even born, in the assurance that the reality is present with the sign, and in the

expectation that the promise sealed in the Sacrament will eventually lead to their faith" (Bierma 2021:140).

Calvin begins his explanation of the first ground by pointing to children who die in infancy. This indicates how much on people's minds infant death was in Calvin's day. Geneva's high infant mortality rate and the medieval Catholic teaching that children who die unbaptised cannot enter heaven must have led to numerous theological questions and pastoral situations for the city's Protestant ministers. Calvin states here that some infants at death (elect infants, it becomes clear a little later) are immediately translated into God's heavenly kingdom. Since that is the moment at which these children attain an "eternal blessedness that consists in the knowledge of God," why, then, could not God "here and now give some taste and first fruits of that good to those who are going one day to enjoy it fully? (Bierma 2021:140).

According to Calvin, baptism contributes to our faith three things, which require to be treated separately. The first object, therefore, for which it is appointed by the Lord, is to be a sign and evidence of our purification, or it is a kind of sealed instrument by which he assures us that all our sins are so deleted, covered, and effaced, that they will never come into his sight, never be mentioned, never imputed. For it is his will that all who have believed, be baptised for the remission of sins. Hence those who have thought that baptism is nothing else than the badge and mark by which we profess our religion before men, in the same way as soldiers attest their profession by bearing the insignia of their commander, having not attended to what was the principal thing in baptism; and this is, that we are to receive it in connection with the promise, "Whoever believes and is baptised will be saved, but whoever does not believe will be condemned (Mark 16:16)" (Calvin 2011: 570-577).

> “In this sense is to be understood the statement of Paul, that “Christ loved the Church, and gave himself for it, that he might sanctify and cleanse it with the washing of water by the word” (Eph. 5:25, 26); and again, “not by works of righteousness which we have done, but according to his mercy he saved us, by the washing of regeneration and renewing of the Holy Ghost” (Titus 3:5). Peter also says that “and this water symbolises baptism that now saves you also” (1 Peter 3:21). “For he did not mean to intimate that our ablution and salvation are perfected by water, or that water possesses in itself the virtue of purifying, regenerating, and renewing; nor does he mean that it is the cause of salvation, but only that the knowledge and certainty of such gifts are perceived in this sacrament. This the words themselves show for Paul connects the word of life and baptism of water as if he had said, by the gospel the message of our ablution and sanctification is announced; by baptism, this message is sealed. And Peter immediately subjoins, that baptism is “not the putting away of the filth of the flesh, but the answer of a good conscience toward God, which is of faith.” Nay, the only purification which baptism promises is by means of the sprinkling of the blood of Christ, who is figured by water from the resemblance to cleansing and washing. Who, then, can say that we are cleansed by that water which certainly attests that the blood of Christ is our true and only laver? So that we cannot have a better argument to refute the hallucination of those who ascribe the whole to the virtue of water than we derive from the very meaning of baptism which leads us away as well from the visible element which is presented to our eye, as from all other means, that it may fix our minds on Christ alone.” (Calvin 2011: 514)

Calvin and reformed theology proceeded on the assumption that baptism is instituted for believers, and does not work but strengthens the new life”. They were naturally confronted with the question as to how infants could be

regarded as believers, and how they could be strengthened spiritually, seeing that they could not yet exercise faith. Some simply pointed out that infants born of believing parents are children of the covenant, and as such heirs of the promises of God, including also the promise of regeneration; and that the spiritual efficacy of baptism is not limited to the time of its administration, but continues through life. The Belgic Confession also expresses that idea in these words: “Neither does this baptism avail us only at the time when water is poured upon us, and received by us, but also through the whole course of our life.”

Others went beyond this position and maintained that the children of the covenant were to be regarded as presumptively regenerated. This is not equivalent to saying that they are all regenerated when they are presented for baptism, but that they are assumed to be regenerated until the contrary appears from their lives. For as long as these children have not committed anything against God, or going against the *Will* of God. One believes that unbaptised children are still part of God’s covenant with their believing parents.

There were also a few who regarded baptism as nothing more than the sign of an external covenant. Under the influence of Socinians, Arminians, Anabaptists, and Rationalists, it has become quite customary in many circles to deny that baptism is a seal of divine grace, and to regard it as a mere act of profession on the part of man. In our day many professing Christians have completely lost the consciousness of the spiritual significance of baptism. It has become a mere formality (Berkhof 1949: 694).

John Calvin’s view was influenced by Martin Luther's idea of baptism as God's promises to the one being baptised attached to the outward sign of washing with water. “Calvin maintained Zwingli's idea of baptism as a public pledge but insisted that it was secondary to baptism's meaning as a sign of

God's promise to forgive sin. He maintained that sacraments were effective instruments in bringing about the promises they represent, however, he also maintained that the promises could be refused by the baptised, and would have no effect in that case" (Riggs 2002: 50-51). "He carefully distinguished between the outward sign of the washing of water with the promises that baptism signifies while maintaining that they were inseparable" (Fesko 2013: 88). John Calvin, like Luther, "maintained the Augustinian doctrine of the sacrament as an outward and visible sign of an inward and spiritual grace. They alike affirmed that sacraments confer grace by the power of the Holy Spirit. Furthermore, Calvin's baptismal theology to Luther's differs in the way Calvin subordinated sacraments to the preaching of the word of God. While Luther placed preaching and sacraments on the same level, Calvin saw sacraments as confirmation which is added to the preaching of the word of God" (Trigg 2001: 218).

> "Calvin and Heinrich Bullinger, Zwingli's successor in Zurich, in 1549 came to an agreement about the sacraments in the Helvetic Consensus. The differences between Zwingli and Calvin were more in emphasis, in personal religious experience, and in personality than in substance. They were alike concerned to emphasize that Jesus Christ is truly present in a spiritual and personal, not in a physical way, that the bread and wine remain bread and wine. Zwingli had no problem in saying this clearly and emphatically. Calvin is so realistic in speaking of partaking of the body and blood of Christ that his conviction that the bread and wine remain bread and wine is sometimes obscured." (Leith 1993: 253)

In turn, Zwingli was accused of turning the supper into a memorial, but for him, it was surely more than that. Christ was present, but he was personally or spiritually present. According to Calvin, baptism contributes to our faith the following;

- It is to be a sign and evidence of our purification. Referring to Mark 16:16, it is evident that, stillborn babies cannot reason, or make a decision about anything. They are covered in the overarching love of God. If a believer needs to respond in faith so that they be pardoned for their sins and further be accepted into the body of Christ, it shows the irrelevance of stillbirth baptism.
- Baptism was instituted for believers. It is for this reason that stillbirth baptism cannot be used to remedy things for the departed. Sacraments are those rituals that are meant to assist a person to find new meaning in their lives.

3.7. Barth's understanding of baptism

It is well-known that Karl Barth, the most influential Reformed theologian of the 20th century, challenged the practice of infant baptism. As with several other doctrines (such as the Word of God, predestination and the Church), Barth had his particular understanding of baptism which differed from orthodox Reformed doctrine. A real crisis for sacramental teaching in Protestant churches began in the 1930s, precipitated by the criticism of infant baptism by Liberal theology. Many were calling into question the origins of infant baptism and some were insisting that the Church did not baptise infants until the third century. Barth was part of this discussion.

Barth's response to the criticism of infant baptism became clearer with a lecture he presented at a gathering of Swiss theological students in 1943. The lecture was printed under the title *Die Kirchliche Lehre von der Taufe*. Barth argued that "Christian baptism is in essence the representation of man's response through his participation by means of the power of the Holy Spirit in the death and resurrection of Jesus Christ, and there-with the representation of man's association with Christ, with the covenant of grace

which is concluded and realised in Christ, and with the fellowship of God's Church" (Barth 1959: 9).

"This lecture caused quite a stir, primarily for its critique of the practice" (Stout 2010: 15). Barth explained that the "sacrament of baptism did not bring about the salvation of humanity, but attested to this salvation by the symbolic representation of his renewal in Christ" (Barth 2004: 320).

Barth believed that baptism as a rite of passage is not some free-standing phenomenon that is dependent on itself but is a phenomenon that has its command from the very head of the Christian Church, hence he argues that: "what baptism portrays, according to the basic passage in Romans 6:1ff, is a supremely critical happening, a real event whose light and shade fall upon the candidate in the course of their baptism" (Barth 1959: 11). Barth affirmed baptism as a sacrament, in the sense that it is a symbol that participates in what it points to. He developed a cognitive view of baptism as a sacrament which was in line with that put forth by Calvin. He is of the view that baptism does not convey grace; it does however bring a person to realise the grace that he or she has been given. Baptism is a public act, meant to speak to the Church. In baptism, candidates are told that their sins are forgiven and that they are children of God. Second, they are told that they no longer belong to themselves; they have no further ground for disobedience. They have a Lord. All allegiance has been pledged to Jesus Christ (Stout 2010: 16).

Barth's understanding of baptism shocked and even angered those in the Reformed tradition, due to his insistence that those baptised should be an active partner in the event. Barth called the Church to move away from infant baptism. We can no longer assume that everyone born to Christian parents is a part of the Christian Church. We should understand this critique against the backdrop of Barth's rejection of the *Deutsche Christen Bewegnung*, with

its emphasis on racial purity in the Church. All Christians with a Jewish connection were removed from the Church in an attempt to establish a pure German Church. The children of German parents were automatically baptised into the Church, creating a *Volkskirche.* Barth's overarching opposition to any form of civil religion influenced his position on infant baptism. Over against the notion of a pure German Church, Barth participated in the *Bekennende Kirche,* the Confessing Church which had as members those who actively professed their faith in Christ.

The New Testament, Barth argues, does not support infant baptism. Barth asks: "What is baptism in itself and as such, if it has no reference to the conscious acknowledgement of regeneration and faith, to the complete divine-human reality, which is portrayed within it; if it cannot be in a really intelligible sense the confirming and binding in allegiance of the second of the chief actors, the one baptised; if it cannot be a matter of decision and confession at all? (see Stout 2010: 19).

In baptism, a person receives the symbol of grace, but it is also a public affirmation of faith, an expression of the will. Baptism places an obligation upon the baptised; it is not meant to oblige parents or god-parents. Baptism is to be a responsible act where those baptised must become the free partner of Jesus Christ, that is, freely deciding and freely confessing. Barth believed that infant baptism stood contrary to the Holy Spirit's free movement and assembling of the Church.

In a typically dialectical manner, Barth also recognised the dangers of adult baptism, which presupposes free decision and confession: the forcing of conversions, perfectionism, false illusions of sanctity, and the focus on faith as a human possibility. However, the dangers of infant baptism are more serious. The real danger is the existence of a Christendom which can disclaim its responsibility for Christianity. The greater threat is when all in a

given society are baptised into the Church by their citizenship of a so-called Christian nation or culture. For Barth, infant baptism reflects a disorder in the sociological structure of the Church. “Where does it stand written that Christians may not be in the minority, perhaps in the very small minority? Might they not be of more use to their surroundings, if they were allowed to be a healthy Church?” (see Stout 2010: 19).

Barth later modified his views somewhat. The request for baptism is invariably followed by a response from the person who requested to be baptised. This response of the person who seeks to be reconciled with God is a recurring theme throughout his theological career, hence it is argued that Barth approached his theological understanding of baptism in a confessional manner – that is, constantly seeking a way for the Christian, to respond to the faithfulness of a God who is not dependent on the response of this Christian, yet out of grace seeks to be in communion with them. He is of the view that “the only adequate answer is the one that teaches us that the change which the human being undergoes derives from the freedom of the gracious God, which allow them the freedom to become what they were not and could not be before and consequently to do what they did not and could not do before, that is, to be faithful to God” (Barth 2004:5f.).

Barth argues that there are two elements in the foundation of the Christian life: one is objective and the other is subjective, and there is both a correlation and a clear distinction between them. He explains these elements thus: first, the divine change makes possible and demands human decision as conversion from unfaithfulness to faithfulness to God, and second, the foundation of the Christian life and the existence of a human being who is faithful to God arises only because this human decision has its origin wholly and utterly in the divine change. It cannot be argued that this view deviates from the traditional understanding of the essence of baptism, but it is necessary to realise from this description of the role of baptism and

its meaning for the individual who responds to this divine change, that they cannot respond appropriately to this gracious God. It is not by chance that Barth maintains that it is only when the two elements are seen together in differentiated unity that one can comprehend them and therefore concede the role of God and the response that is envisaged from the individual (Barth 2004: 41). He is of the view that

> "faith plays an essential role in this transaction, for it is important that when we start to believe, we must establish a fact which - no matter how improbable it might seem, or how often or severely we might later oppose it - we cannot reverse ... Anyone who is to be baptised takes this first step as their resolution to be obedient to Christ who first freed them to take this first step and summoned them to it. Baptism takes place because the person who has come to believe in Christ requests it; therefore, they do this as their own work, yet they do this in obedience to Christ." (Barth 2004: 43)

Karl Barth established three basic lines of argument in his doctrine of Christian baptism, namely:

The basis of baptism

Barth admits that Matthew 28:19, points both implicitly and explicitly to the will and command of the Man of Nazareth who was crucified at Mount Calvary and was manifested as the Messiah of Israel and the Saviour of the world - his will and command is that those who would join and belong to His people should be baptised and that his commitment to his people should include the summoning to baptism and the granting of baptism to those who wish to belong to his people. Barth maintains that the basis of the baptism of Jesus Christ is located in his baptism by John in the River Jordan. This account reveals the motivation which distinguishes his baptism from a custom, a traditional ceremony which is accepted and cherished because it

is established and universal practice, and its motivation as a command which is given to the Christian community which it cannot evade without making itself "guilty of caprice" (Barth 2004: 67).

The goal of baptism

Barth is of the view that the action of those who give and receive Christian baptism, like that of John and those whom he baptised, looks beyond itself, beyond the capacities of the participants, the power of their common action, the particular character and effect of the action. Its *telos* is transcendent and not immanent (Barth 2004: 69).

The meaning of baptism

Barth argues that baptism is human action taken by people who are obedient to Christ and whose hope is in him. He further maintains that baptism takes place in active recognition of the grace of God which justifies, sanctifies and calls. "Baptism responds to a mystery, to the sacrament of the history of Jesus Christ, of his resurrection, of the outpouring of the Holy Spirit. It is not itself, however, a mystery or a sacrament" (Barth 2004:102). He opposed the traditional view of baptism as a sacrament and therefore as something that is shrouded in mystery. Barth affirms that,

In Roman Catholicism, baptism is considered a sign which was ordained by Christ and which is used and guaranteed by Him through the Church's baptism. Baptism is further understood as having been filled with divine power and more insightful and all-inclusive than the word, for it is perceived with all the senses; symbolises and causally underlines this power. Sacrament seen in this way is perceived to possess some kind of sacramental power, which means that, a sacrament such as baptism is considered to be working *ex opere operato.* Although faith and obedience are both demanded and established, baptism takes place independently of

the faith, the personal orthodoxy, or the moral worthiness of either the minister or the recipient (Barth 2004:103).

In his understanding of baptism as a human activity, *albeit* an important one in that it reveals the ethos of those who are willed by God to respond to his faithfulness, Barth departs from the traditional decree that children of Christian parents must be baptised. What is significant here about Barth and his views about infant baptism is that although Barth's doctrine of baptism is likened to that of Zwingli, who despite the odds is construed as one of the most passionate advocates for infant baptism, Barth rejects it and therefore stands with those who were severely criticised by Zwingli and consequently the other reformers.

One other roughly contemporary treatment of baptism, by Barth, should be briefly noted. In his 1947 discussion of the *Heidelberg Catechism*, Barth treated baptism in a similar way. There he stated that sacraments do not mediate grace to recipients, but they do mediate, in the sense that they point to something else. The sacraments should be understood as acts of the Church, as “eventful witnesses.” As witnesses, they are meaningful signs. The sacraments are acts that the Church performs, which by the work of the Holy Spirit serve as a witness to those who observe. “Baptism is the action which eventfully bears witness to Christians that they have already entered into the fellowship of the death of Jesus Christ and may therefore once and for all be certain of their faith and in faith of the forgiveness of their sins.” Baptism is a sign that indicates something else. A sacramental union exists between the elements which signify the action of God, and the sacramental action itself. Thus there is a sacramental union between one’s baptism and one’s fellowship with Christ. Here Barth also says that in baptism one receives the confirmation of faith. Baptism “is an event in my life which testifies to me that I am set apart to be a member of Christ.” This treatment of the *Heidelberg Catechism* contains the same cognitive understanding of

baptism as a sacrament that confirms one's faith, as well as the corresponding rejection of infant baptism, contained in the teaching of the Church regarding baptism (Stout 2010: 19-20).

Barth's view of salvation is Christocentric. In Jesus Christ, the reconciliation of all of mankind to God has already taken place and through Christ man is already elect and justified. If we accept this explanation, there is no need for the baptism of stillborn because salvation according to him is eternal for everyone, even to those who have rejected or denied God. He argued against more conservative strains of Protestant Christianity in which damnation is seen as an absolute certainty for many people. According to him, Christ's grace is central (Bauckham 1978: 47-54). His view of salvation put Jesus Christ at the centre and anything else as secondary.

3.8. Pentecostal understanding of baptism

According to general sources like *Encyclopaedia Britannica*

> " the origins of Pentecostalism are complex, but this movement is usually traced back to the first day of the twentieth century – January 1, 1901. Charles Parham (1873-1929) had launched the Bethel Bible College in Topeka, Kansas a few months earlier. One of his particular interests was the phenomenon of speaking in tongues, which is described in Acts 2: 1– 4. Most Christians had taken this to be something that happened in the early Church but were no longer part of the Christian experience. On New Year's Day, 1901, one of Parham's students experienced this phenomenon. A few days later, Parham experienced it for himself. Parham began to teach about this apparent recovery of the gift of tongues. The term "Pentecostalism" was applied to the movement, taking its name from the "Day of Pentecost," when the phenomenon was experienced by the first disciples." (https://www.britannica.com/topic/Pentecostalism)

The Pentecostal movement spread rapidly in America, appealing especially to the marginalised African American Christian groupings. Although Pentecostalism can be thought of as traditionalist in its Christian theology, it differs radically from other Christian groupings in the emphasis it places on speaking in tongues and its forms of worship. These styles of worship are strongly experiential and involve prophesying, healings, and exorcisms. These forms and the perceived lack of intellectual sophistication of the movement led to its being ignored by mainline denominations and the academy.

The incident that brought Pentecostalism to wider public attention took place in Van Nuys, California, in 1960. The rector of the local Episcopalian Church, Dennis Bennett, told his astonished congregation that he had been filled with the Holy Spirit and had spoken in tongues. Reaction varied from bewilderment to outrage; the local Episcopalian bishop promptly banned speaking in tongues from his Churches. However, it soon became clear that others in the mainline denominations had shared Bennett's experience. They came out of their closet and made it clear that they believed that they had experienced an authentic New Testament phenomenon, which would lead to the renewal of the Churches. By the late 1960s, it was evident that some form of renewal based on charismatic gifts such as speaking in tongues was gaining a hold within Anglican, Lutheran, Methodist, and Presbyterian circles. Perhaps most importantly of all, a growing charismatic movement began to develop within the Roman Catholic Church. Using the term "Pentecostal" to describe this now became problematic, as this name was used to refer to a family of Churches – such as the Assemblies of God – which placed particular emphasis on speaking in tongues (McGrath 2015: 212).

The Pentecostal movement challenged the traditional Catholic and Protestant understanding of baptism, with the emphasis on baptism with the Holy Spirit and the signs of the Spirit. Green (2017 explains:

> "The heart of this Pentecostal strand is very important, and is strongly rooted in the New Testament as either of the other two. The Church is seen not as the historical community nor as to the body of those who have expressed their repentance and faith. No, receiving the Holy Spirit is the mark of the Church. The baptism of the Spirit is the only baptism worth having. "Anyone who does not have the Spirit of Christ does not belong to him" (i.e. is not a Christian). That is the teaching of Paul in Romans 8:9. And what this same apostle wanted to know, when he met a handful of Samaritan believers in Ephesus, was, "Did you receive the Holy Spirit when you believed?" (Acts 19:2). So when the Spirit unmistakably falls on Cornelius even before Peter had finished preaching the gospel to him that is enough. Peter enquired, "Can anyone forbid water for baptising these people who have received the Holy Spirit just as we have? (Acts 10:47)" (Green 2017: 169)

With the dawn of the twentieth century, a modern Pentecostal movement emerged. The modern Pentecostal movement began with a new understanding concerning the baptism in the Holy Spirit. The distinction in the doctrine is both the matter of tongues as evidence and the issue of subsequence. Pentecostals state the doctrine in slightly different terms, but the basic conclusion is that after conversion a person can and should be baptised in the Holy Spirit and tongues are given as evidence of such. As a result of this distinctive doctrine, Pentecostals have placed a high emphasis on not only tongues but also on the work, ministry, and person of the Holy Spirit as a whole. Without question, since its early beginnings,

the Pentecostal movement has faced direct and forceful opposition from fellow believers.

Pentecostals have endured ridicule, accusations of various kinds, and both social and ecumenical pressures. “Unfortunately, much of that opposition still exists today in many Christian circles in spite of the fact that the Pentecostal movement has had such tremendous success worldwide” (Prewitt 2015: 2-3). The heart of the controversy is the doctrine of baptism in the Holy Spirit. “People who are evangelical in their outlook are agreed with one another about practically everything in connection with the doctrine of the person and the work of the Holy Spirit apart from this one matter, . . . but when you come to this matter of the baptism with the Holy Spirit there is a divergence and a disagreement” (Lederle 1985: 2).

Pentecostals believe that baptism in the Holy Spirit is the entrance to a Spirit-empowered ministry expansion. In essence, Pentecostals believe that the baptism in the Holy Spirit is the endowment of power for accomplishing the mandate of Jesus: “And he said unto them, Go ye into all the world, and preach the gospel to every creature” (Mark 16:15 AV). In Acts 1:8, Jesus promises that power will be given to the disciples for fulfilling that mission: “But ye shall receive power, after that, the Holy Ghost is come upon you: and ye shall be witnesses unto me both in Jerusalem, and in all Judaea, and in Samaria, and unto the uttermost part of the earth.” Most interpreters maintain that the power for witness in the early Church came from this experience spoken of by Jesus and that this promise of power was realised on Pentecost in Acts 2:1-4.

Pentecostals are distinct in that they proclaim that the same baptism that was given on Pentecost in the book of Acts is available (including evidential tongues) today and is the source of power for ministry expansion now. Pentecostals believe that this same unique baptism in the Holy Spirit is

available to believers today for the same purpose of empowering them for service … The baptism in the Holy Spirit brings personal boldness and the power of the Spirit into the believer's life in order to accomplish mighty works in Christ's name and to make one's witness and proclamation effective … In the mind-set of Pentecostals, the baptism in the Holy Spirit with evidential tongues is a prerequisite for all ministry expansion activity (Prewitt 2015: 2-3).

Second, it is understood that baptism in the Holy Spirit, with the evidence of speaking in tongues, is the doorway to the gifts of the Spirit. Baptism in the Spirit is an initiation into the Spirit's fullness, prophetic activity and supernatural gifts. Baptism in the Holy Spirit is not just for empowering ministry, but it also has to do with a ministry of gifts. Individuals baptised in and empowered by the Spirit affects the rest of the body of believers. The ultimate need is for every member in the body of Christ to be thus empowered so the Church might operate in the full dimension of life in the Spirit (Prewitt 2015: 5).

Pentecostals also hold to the belief that baptism in the Holy Spirit has a significant effect on believers as individuals. Paul said: "Anyone who speaks in a tongue edifies themselves, but the one who prophesies edifies the Church." (1 Cor. 14:4 NIV). Since Pentecostals avow to the edification of the individual, they proceed to encourage believers to seek the blessings associated with the baptism with the Spirit. Pentecostals hold that the controversial doctrine of the baptism with the Holy Spirit after salvation with the evidence of speaking in other tongues is the fulfilment of the promise of the Father, and can be progressively traced through the dispensations to the modern Church as a valid and necessary experience today that God has given to His people.

Pentecostals insist that 'all believers have the Holy Spirit, yet .... all believers, in addition to having the Holy Spirit, may be filled with or baptised with the Holy Spirit. The baptism in the Holy Spirit· is a unique experience available to the converted, regenerated Christian for a special, specific purpose … In Pentecostalism, the purpose of Spirit baptism is empowerment. They believe that the subsequent baptism of the Holy Spirit is necessary for an empowered Christian life. Without it, Pentecostals believe that there occurs a subnormal Church in which the dynamic, experiential, empowering quality of Christian life is absent (Horton 1994: 448).

Dunn (1970: 401) is of the opinion that the baptism in the Holy Spirit is a second (Pentecostal) experience distinct from and subsequent to conversion which gives power for witness. Furthermore, there is a twofold understanding of the Holy Spirit in the New Testament: "On the one hand it is the power which makes a person a Christian. On the other hand, it is the power given occasionally to a believer, enabling them to speak or act in an extraordinary way" (Jongeneel 1989: 58).

This understanding of baptism rules out any possibility of the baptism of stillborn children.

3.9. Baptism of the dead or ‘proxy baptism’ by Latter-day Saints

The Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints (known by their nickname ‘Mormons’) is the one denomination that believes in ‘proxy or vicarious baptism’ for the dead and they trace this posthumous kind of baptism to the apostle Paul, as found in 1 Cor. 15:29: "Now if there is no resurrection, what will those do who are baptized for the dead? If the dead are not raised at all, why are people baptized for them?" (NIV). This indicates that there had been a practice in the Corinthian community to baptise people on behalf of those who had already passed away, and did not or could not convert before

their death. This indicates an early perception that baptism was necessary for salvation. However, the fact that Paul mentions this practice, does not imply that he approved of it.

Furthermore, Mormons believe that their faith's founding prophet restored this apostolic practice after many years of neglect by mainstream Christians. Baptism for the dead was Joseph Smith's answer in trying to answer the question 'what happens to people who die without belonging to any Church during their lifetime?' According to Mormons, vicarious baptism ensures that those who died without being baptised, get to be included in the Mormon fold and further gain access to the kingdom of God. Baptism for the dead is based upon Smith's doctrine that the ordinance of baptism was necessary to obtain salvation in the afterlife and that a living could act as a proxy for the deceased person (Stephenson & Marquardt 2017: 132-146).

In 1854, Joseph Smith introduced the subject of baptism for the dead at Seymour Brunson's funeral, claiming that he laid the subject before the congregation and that it was up to them to receive or reject it (Stephenson & Marquardt 2017: 141).

> "Joseph Smith also preached at Jane Neyman's son funeral and it is noted that, with reference to 1 Corinthians 15, Smith preached a more comprehensive sermon on the subject and people began to act as proxies for their dead relatives and friends. Pondering over the ambiguous passage about baptism for the dead in 1 Corinthians 15:29, Smith concluded that the ordinance of water baptism was required for those who have died without the gospel and that they can receive the saving ordinance by proxy through immersion by someone in mortality." (Stephenson & Marquardt 2017: 142).

In his article on Religion News Service, published on the February 15, 2012, Daniel Burke says "during baptism, young Mormon men and women

dressed in white robes would stand-in for the deceased and it is considered an honour to be immersed in baptismal founts while the names of the deceased are recited. The Church emphasises that anyone wishing to be involved in proxy baptism must do so for family members only. It is believed that spirits of the dead must accept the baptism as it cannot be involuntarily imposed." (https://www.washingtonpost.com/national/on-faith/why-do-mormons-baptise-the-dead/2012/02/15/gIQAnYfOGR_story.html?tid=usw_passupdatepg)

It must be noted that when we look at Scripture, there is no reference in the Bible of anyone getting baptised for someone who has already died. However, "it cannot be denied that Paul, in 1 Cor. 15:29 is speaking of vicarious baptism: one is baptised for the dead to ensure for them a share in the effect of baptism, and this must relate to a post-mortal life" (Agersnap 1999: 175). Albrecht Oepke (in Hull 2005) even goes so far as to suggest that all interpretations of this text which circumvent a reading of vicarious baptism are misleading. These opinions are representative of the tenacity of the majority reading in contemporary biblical scholarship (Hull 2005: 12).

Arthur Carr (1901), takes vicarious baptism for granted as the only way to read 1 Cor. 15:29. He considers a few alternatives and dismisses them, his interest is not in explaining the origin or the practice of vicarious baptism (Carr 1901: 371).

According to him, it is most likely that the earliest Christian community in Corinth was composed of Jews who awaited the consolation of Israel and "God-fearers" (Finn 1997: 75). Overjoyed that their hopes for a Messiah had been fulfilled in Jesus, believing that baptism was how one was incorporated into the resurrection, and expecting the imminent return of the Messiah, these early Christians began to wonder about their friends, who would also have accepted baptism had they lived long enough to

hear the gospel preached in Corinth. Given the limited means at their disposal, since they comprised a nascent community of limited theological means, they developed a practice of vicarious baptism (Carr 1901: 374).

Paul's only reason for mentioning the practice of vicarious baptism in 1 Cor. 15:29 was to show the incongruity within the community wherein some practice vicarious baptism, an indication of great faith in the resurrection, and others deny that same resurrection, *vis-à-vis* 1 Cor. 15:12 (Hull 2005: 13). As time passed and the faith of the community matured, the absurdity of such a custom manifested itself to the Corinthian Christians, and vicarious baptism fell out of practice and memory (Carr 1901: 374).

Herbert Preisker (in Hull 2005) claims that the text should be read in terms of heightened eschatological concern in Corinth, a concern that is especially indicated by 1 Cor. 15:28. He holds that the necessity of baptism for inclusion in the Christian community is a later development from the original means of inclusion in the community: faith. Relatively early on, a slight corruption among the Corinthians baptismal understanding replaced faith as a means of entrance into the number of the elect with the baptismal rite. Since many early Christians remained and died unbaptised, Preisker sees 15:29 to be an attempt on the part of some Corinthians to fill the number of the elect, and therefore to hasten the Parousia, while at the same time guaranteeing salvation for those deceased among their number who had died without the baptismal rite. He concludes that vicarious baptism is less the result of a baptismal misunderstanding than it is the result of an eschatological urgency, a momentary aberration brought about by misconceptions in the early Church regarding the efficacy of baptism and the time of the Parousia (Hull 2005: 14).

Ralston (1950), from the perspective of the Church of the Latter-day Saints, offered six basic conclusions about baptism for the dead:

- “baptism for the dead at best is very strictly limited;
- there is no temple on the earth where baptism for the dead can be practised according to the limitations of God;
- baptism for the dead is in no way essential to the salvation of either the living or the dead;
- baptism for the dead is not a basic principle of Christ's gospel, for the Book of Mormon, which contains the fullness, does not teach it;
- the doctrine is at best permissible, and this only under very specific conditions; and
- "members of the Reorganized Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-Day Saints cannot feel justified in accepting or rejecting it, nor can we rightfully do so unless God in his wisdom shall reveal it in such a way and with such a purpose that it will be completely consistent with him, God’s Son, and the gospel" (Ralston 1950 10-49).”

3.10. Concluding remarks

It is clear from this very short and limited overview of the diverging views on baptism through history, that the baptism or proxy baptism of stillborn children is problematic. Neither Scripture nor major theologians or Church traditions would support such a practice. This preliminary conclusion will be discussed further in the next chapter, where other relevant doctrines will be discussed.

4. SYSTEMATIC PERSPECTIVES

4.1. Introduction

In this chapter, an attempt will be made to look more systematically at baptism, as well as other relevant doctrines. In the last part of the chapter, these doctrines will be discussed from the perspective of the Methodist Church of South Africa.

4.2. Doctrine of original sin

Scripture tells us that humanity was created in the image and likeness of God (Gen 1:27) and that God loves every human being God (John 3:16). All of us, as human beings, bear this image of God. We have been created to enjoy communion with God, other human beings and all of creation. This shows the attributes of who God is, being relational, communal and loving.

The evocative phrase “the image of God” has been interpreted in several different ways in the history of Christianity. One interpretation focuses on humanity’s dominion over the earth, that is, humanity resembles God in its exercise of power and dominion over the other creatures (Migliore 1991: 121).

The importance of every human being is indicated in Scripture. God knows every human being even before conception (see Jer. 1:4-5): “Then the word of the Lord came to me, saying: ‘Before I formed you in the womb I knew you; before you were born I sanctified you; I ordained you a prophet to the nations.” It is clear that to be known by God even before one is physically seen by the naked eye, to a point of being appointed by God, is evident enough to warrant one being called a child of God.

Another example is found in Psalm 139:13-16: “For you created my inmost being; you knit me together in my mother’s womb. I praise you because I

am fearfully and wonderfully made; your works are wonderful; I know that full well. My frame was not hidden from you when I was made in the secret place, when I was woven together in the depths of the earth. Your eyes saw my unformed body; all the days ordained for me were written in your book".

This raises the question of human sin, which destroys the image of God in man and the relationship between God and man. If humans were created to exist in perfect communion with God, why do we sin and what is the origin of sin? The history of the human race is primarily a history of sin and rebellion against God, with catastrophic effects on fellow human beings and the whole of creation (Grudem & Gregg 2015: 595).

One of the definitions we learn as children is that sin is "missing the mark", doing that which is contrary to God's command, doing what God forbids. It is saying no to God and God's plan for us. Furthermore, it is wilful disobedience to God. This disobedience may be an action, a thought, a desire, an intention, or it may be an omission or lack of love (Killgallon, Weber, & Ziegmann 1990: 224).

Christian tradition defines sin as the condition of estrangement from God, which affects the whole human race. Sins are specific actions, words or thoughts which arise from our sinful condition and deny the presence, power and purpose of God. The most commonly known story or reference that is used is found in the story of Adam and Eve in Genesis 3. Their lives were in perfect harmony until they ate the forbidden fruit. In this act, they understood one part of the created order (the fruit) in the light of another part of the created order (the serpent) without any reference to God. Here sin is understood as living life with no reverence to God, or as Augustine said, in aversion to God and the created order (Leith 1993: 105). Grudem and Gregg (2015) explain the consequences of the fall:

> “Sin had disastrous consequences for humanity. The sin of Adam and Eve did not affect themselves only; it became the heritage of the human race. Sin can, therefore, be defined as; any failure to conform to the moral law of God in act, attitude, or nature. Sin is here defined in relation to God and his moral law. Sin includes not only individual acts such as stealing or lying or committing murder, but also attitudes that are contrary to the attitudes God requires of us. We see this in the Ten Commandments, which not only prohibit sinful actions but also wrong attitudes: ‘You shall not covet your neighbour’s house. You shall not covet your neighbour’s wife, or his manservant or maidservant, his ox or donkey, or anything that belongs to your neighbour’ (Ex. 20:17 NIV). Here God specifies that a desire to steal or to commit adultery is also sin in God’s sight.”(Grudem & Gregg 2015: 595)

Christian doctrine asserts that humans inherit a tainted nature and a proclivity to sin through the fact of birth. This means that stillborn babies are also tainted irrespective of their nature. Berkhof (1949) says:

> “The problem of the origin of the evil that is in the world has always been considered as one of the profound problems of philosophy and theology. It is a problem that naturally forces itself upon the attention of man, since the power of evil is both great and universal, is an ever-present blight on life in all its manifestations, and is a matter of daily experience in the life of every man. Philosophers were constrained to face the problem and to seek an answer to the question as to the origin of all the evil, and particularly of the moral evil, that is in the world. To some, it seemed to be so much a part of life itself that they sought the solution for it in the natural constitution of things. Others, however, were convinced that it had a voluntary origin, that is, that it originated in the free choice of man, either in the present or in some previous existence.” (Berkhof 1949: 178)

Migliore (2004) adds to this:

> "The vexing question of the origin of sin has been a preoccupation of much traditional theological anthropology. Several of the proposed answers to this question are clearly in contradiction to the primary biblical emphasis on sin as rooted in the misuse or corruption of human freedom. The origin of sin is not to be traced back to bodily existence or human sexuality or some other natural condition of life, as has been the tendency in some strands of Christian theology. Nor is the origin of sin to be found in ignorance or lack of education, as much Protestant liberal theology of the nineteenth century believed. Nor is the origin of sin to be located in a simplistic fashion in unjust social conditions, as is assumed by many social reform movements." (Migliore 2004: 154)

In the wake of the catastrophic evils of the twentieth century, optimism in terms of the remedies of sin has been exposed as superficial. The doctrine of original sin articulates a deep truth about the human condition. It can only be understood in paradoxical statements, i.e. sin is a universal condition, but it is also a self-chosen act for which we are responsible. Sin is part of all human action, not only in what is manifestly evil but also in what is regarded as good. Sin is a corruption of the person, but it is also active and powerful in public and corporate structures of life. In modern society, there is an increasing tendency to privatise sin and to restrict it to the behaviour of individuals. Against this tendency stands the biblical witness with its emphasis on an encompassing reign of evil and the solidarity of all humanity in the old "Adam" of sin and alienation (Migliore 2004: 156). Grudem and Gregg (2015) conclude:

> "Where did sin come from? How did it come into the universe? We must affirm that God himself did not sin, and God is not to be blamed for sin. It was man who sinned, and it was angels who sinned, and in

> both cases, they did so by wilful, voluntary choice. To blame God for sin would be blasphemy against the character of God. “His work is perfect; for all his ways are just. A God of faithfulness and without iniquity, just and right is God (Deut. 32:4).” (Grudem & Gregg 2015: 595)

Despite the fall of humanity into sin, God sent God’s Son to die for all. God’s plan of salvation is the way to eternal life for all who believe. But what about stillborn babies? Is it possible for a stillborn to be saved without understanding anything about sin and salvation through Christ? If unbaptised children die, how can they escape the consequence of the fall and original sin?

Augustine, on his assertion on the doctrine of original sin, argued that every human being is born sinful by nature and guilty of sin. This means that logically every child born is under the judgement of God and he accordingly linked this doctrine to the practice of infant baptism. He further asserts that, without the reception of baptism, which for him is the washing away of original guilt, babies who die without baptism would have no hope of reaching heaven. Baptism was for him, a method of achieving the ideal of eternal salvation (Bridge 1977: 37).

This same belief (although with no or little knowledge of Augustine) has led to parents of stillborn asking that their dead infants receive baptism before they can be buried. This, according to parents will ensure or guarantee that they are acceptable before God Almighty. However, this notion is not compatible with a Reformed or Methodist understanding of the sacraments.

The inclusive nature of God’s covenant and the salvific work of Christ could imply that stillborn, despite the human condition and original sin, are included in God’s grace and do not need baptism to ‘ensure’ their salvation. When Christ died on the cross, every one of us, including those who

executed him, were covered by his blood. In Jeremiah 1:4-5, as stated earlier, the phrase… "*before you were born I sanctified you…,* gives us proof that earthly cleansing or purification is irrelevant and these cannot be matched up with divine sanctification granted to each human being from the moment of conception.

Based on this discussion, it is clear that any attempt to baptise stillborn on the assumption that baptism changes their 'status' is based on a misconception. Original sin affects every single human being, including the stillborn. Simultaneously, God's grace is given freely to the children of believers based on the covenant and God's love. God was present during conception and continued to be part of the foetus during this whole time. The engulfing undeserved grace of God that surpasses all understanding is sufficient enough to ensure that acceptance of a stillborn is incorporated into the body of Christ. At most, baptism functions as a sign of God's grace, but not as a means of grace that cleanses the stillborn *ex opero operato.*

4.3. Doctrine of predestination

The second doctrine relevant to our discussion of the baptism of stillborn relates to predestination. Predestination means that God chose or elected human beings, before the foundation of the world, to be rescued from the sinful condition in which they had fallen. Predestination stands over against all forms of work righteousness, over every effort to achieve heaven by our willpower, to earn our salvation. Predestination means that salvation is a gift and that in electing us God does for us what we could not do for ourselves (Leith 1993: 225).

Throughout the seventeenth century, the topic of predestination engendered considerable debate among both Catholics and Protestants. Disputes about predestination and foreknowledge in the late sixteenth and early seventeenth century paved the way not only for the parting of the

ways between the Reformed and Arminian confessions but also for the crystallisation of Calvinist orthodoxy as seen in the famous five articles published by the Synod of Dordt in 1619. While ostensibly these controversies turned on the interpretation of Scripture, Muller (in Burton 2012) has demonstrated that the differing hermeneutics of both sides were rooted in their metaphysical presuppositions concerning the doctrine of God and his relation to man. It is clear that many of the fundamental differences between the Reformed and Arminians hinge on their different conceptions of divine power, understanding and will, both separately and interrelation (Burton 2012: 279).

Predestination is a controversial doctrine. It has been there for quite some time in the history of Church dogma. It is also one of the most daunting, demanding, and debated doctrines in Scripture. In the beloved King James Version (KJV) “predestined” occurs four times: twice in Romans 8 (29–30) and twice in Ephesians 1 (5, 11). In the New American Standard Bible (NASB) it appears six times, in the Romans 8 and Ephesians 1 passages, as well as in Acts 4:28 and 1 Corinthians 2:7 (Gentry 2010: 9).

According to Pink (2011), this difficult doctrine could be understood better if we attend to three different aspects, which he formulates as follows:

> “First, in the understanding of it. Unless we are privileged to sit under the ministry of some spirit-taught servant of God, who presents the truth to us systematically, great pains and diligence are called for in the searching of the Scriptures, so that we may collect and tabulate their scattered statements on this subject. It has not pleased the Holy Spirit to give us one complete and orderly setting forth of the doctrine of election, but instead “here a little, there a little” – in typical history, in psalm and prophecy, in the great prayer of Christ (John 17), in the epistle of the apostle. Second, in the acceptation of it. This presents

> much greater difficulty, for when the mind perceives what the Scriptures reveal thereon, the heart is loath to receive such a humbling and flesh-withering truth. How earnestly we need to pray for God to subdue our enmity against Him and our prejudice against His truth. Third, in the proclamation of it. No novice is competent to present this subject in its scriptural perspective and proportions." (Pink 2011: 9)

Furthermore, "predestination means that God has singled out certain ones to be the objects of His saving grace, while others are left to suffer the just punishment of their sins. It means that before the foundation of the world, God chose out of the mass of our fallen humanity a certain number and predestined them to be conformed to the image of His Son" (Pink 2011: 22).

In the Bible, we find multiple Greek words which could convey the concept. One example is the Greek word *proorizō*. The prefix pro- corresponds to the English prefix pre-, meaning something that takes place in advance, in front of, or before something else that follows later, while *orizō* means "to appoint, designate, assign." Therefore, *proorizō* refers to ordaining or designating something beforehand.

Without being fatalists, thinking that everything that happens falls out according to some impersonal guiding principle, we can say that we each have a destiny. In God's providence, that destiny is in His hand and His eternal plan. Before any of us were born, our destinies were written by God before the foundation of the earth. Concerning salvation, the doctrine of predestination does not include the concept that every detail of our lives is foreordained and predestined by God. Rather, this doctrine deals with our ultimate destiny. Certainly, every detail of our lives is foreordained by God, but that truth belongs more properly to the doctrine of God's providence.

The doctrine of predestination, in its initial form, does not include these particular elements in its scope (though they are true). It simply concerns

our final destiny and where we will go when we die. Most Christians will agree that God is not simply a spectator of human events, but that He does, at least in some ways, decide things in advance. Most would affirm that in at least some sense, God has what we call foreknowledge, as this concept is deeply rooted in the pages of Scripture. God knows all things in advance, and He knows them perfectly. But as soon as we begin to probe the extent of that foreknowledge and the grounds for that foreknowledge, Christians divide into opposite camps and the philosophical debates erupt (Sproul 2019: 7).

The essential attributes of God, especially omniscience, also help inform Wesley's understanding of predestination and election as distinct actions of the divine being.

Expounding upon Romans 8:29-30, Wesley, first of all, pointed out that this series of actions must not be described as a chain of causes and effects, but simply as "the order in which the several branches of salvation constantly follow each other." Put another way, this is "the method in which God works." In this order of salvation detailed by the apostle Paul, Wesley gives great weight to the omniscience of God in that "God foreknew those in every nation who would believe." Such foreknowledge, which constitutes the first step, is not determinative or coercive but investigative: "we must not think they are because he knows them. No; he knows them because they are." (Collins 2007: 731 of 1316). Wesley recognised that such a manner of speaking is largely anthropomorphic: "For if we speak properly there is no such thing as either foreknowledge or after-knowledge in God. All time, or rather all eternity . . . is present to him at once." In other words, all events are open to the immediacy of divine omniscience. One of the more important corollaries of the biblical truth that the foreknowledge of God is not determinative is the grace-infused freedom of humanity. “Such a freedom not only underscores the integrity of what it means to be a person in the

sight of a holy God, but also must be carefully understood, lest there be misunderstanding" (Collins 2007: 733 of 1316).

In Wesley's estimation such freedom, restored by grace after the debilitating effects of original sin, renders men and women both "address-able" and "account-able" with the consequence that they are capable of both reward and punishment. The second step in this Pauline order is that those whom God foreknew; the Holy One was also predestined to be conformed to the image of his Son. Wesley interprets this biblical truth not in a deterministic way, running roughshod over human freedom restored in some measure by grace, but in a way that is consonant with the understanding that

> "God decrees from everlasting to everlasting that all who believe in the Son of his love shall be conformed to his image." Put another way, the omniscience and foreknowledge of God, once again, informs predestination, giving it a proper sense. Therefore, the "unchangeable, irreversible, irresistible decree of God" is not that the Most High will give saving grace only to the elect and withhold it from the reprobate, but none other than "he that believeth shall be saved; he that believeth not shall be damned." Election, then, is not unconditional but conditional; it requires having faith in Jesus Christ." (Collins 2007: 750 of 1316)

Wesley believed that the doctrine of predestination, as held by some of his contemporaries, "directly tends to destroy that holiness which is the end of all the ordinances of God." Again, this teaching not only but also "cuts off one of the strongest motives to all acts of bodily mercy, such as feeding the hungry, clothing the naked, and the like." Similarly, the doctrine of predestination, if not properly understood, can easily undermine the love of God and humanity. For one thing, it strikes at the love of God in the sense that it makes the glorious One the agent of all that happens, both good and evil. Implicating God in sin, the Westminster Assembly of Divines, as

Wesley understood them, contended that "whatever happens in time, was unchangeably determined from all eternity."(Collins 2007: 788 of 1316) And Susanna Wesley herself cautioned her son early on against such a deterministic philosophy that was superimposed upon the sacred Scriptures: The doctrine of predestination, as maintained by the rigid Calvinists, is very shocking, and ought utterly to be abhorred; because it directly charges the most Holy God with being the author of sin (Collins 2007: 797 of 1316). Wesley, in his sermon "Free Grace," refers to the doctrine of predestination, as held by some of the Calvinists, as blasphemy in that "it represents the most Holy God as worse than the devil, as more false, more cruel and more unjust."

Our understanding of predestination could play a role in our opinion, whether the unbaptised children of believers could be saved. What if God predestined the unbaptised to be saved, but due to circumstance they were not baptised? Again, is it the rite of baptism which affects salvation, or does salvation rest solely on the decisions and acts of God?

4.4. The doctrine of the last things (eschatology)

In the discourse on the baptism of the stillborn, the question is whether stillborns will receive eternal life. This immediately brings us to the doctrine of the ‘last things’, or eschatology. The question here is how baptism relates to eternal life.

The word “eschatology” comes from two Greek words, *eschatos* (“farthest” or “last”) and logos (“word,” “instruction,” “teaching”). Eschatology, therefore, has been defined as: “the word concerning, or the study of, what is ultimate or last, that is, what is final in the programme of God”; or “teaching about the end,” this means that it is “any theology of history based upon a divinely revealed message about the last events”; or “the doctrine of the last things” (Menn 2018: 472) or the study of the end-times (Sundy 2020: 92).

“It deals with the teaching or belief, that the world … tends towards a definite final goal, beyond which a new order of affairs will be established, frequently with the further implication, that this new order of affairs will not be subject to any further change, but will partake of the static character of the eternal” (Vos 1930: 92).

Eschatology helps us to understand the vast difference between the Greek idea of the immortality of the individual soul and the Biblical idea of a purpose of God running through the ages leading to a final consummation in which God will give God’s people eternal life through the resurrection of the dead (Baillie 1957: 68). Schweitzer thought that the sacraments are essentially eschatological in origin, purpose and significance. Baptism derives its meaning from the conviction that the final age and Messianic kingdom had arrived, and the final coming of the kingdom was imminent. This eschatological expectation began with John the Baptist, and even his baptism had eschatological significance, as a preparation for the coming of the kingdom (Baillie 1957: 68).

John the Baptist stressed the imminent judgment and punishment of unrepentant sinners, Christ-focused on the joy of salvation and the kingdom of God. This was the main content of the teaching ministry of Jesus (Meier 2001:1320). Jesus was an eschatological and apocalyptic prophet, in the same prophetic line to which John the Baptist belonged (Maloney 1999:12-13).

Jesus understood the coming of the new eschatological reality as organically connected with his ministry and, notably, with his death. Schweitzer, according to Hoyle (1912) further asserts that,

> “baptism is the sign whereby salvation was assured to the eschatological community; assurance of salvation in a time of eschatological expectation demanded some kind of security for the

> future of which the earnest could be possessed in the present … the eschatological view of the sacrament explains the early history of Christian dogma. He claims that "the thorough-going eschatological interpretation of the life of Jesus puts into the hands of those who are re-constructing the history of dogma in the earliest times an explanation of the conception of the sacraments, of which they had been able hitherto only to note the presence as an X of which the origin was undiscoverable, and for which they possessed no equation by which it could be evaluated." (Hoyle 1912: 520)

Baptism is regarded as a sacrament of inaugurated eschatology. Those baptised into Christ as living members of the body of Christ lives within the eschatological tension between the first and second coming of Christ; the kingdom that has come and will be perfected on the last day (Porter & Cross 1999: 347). The death and resurrection of Jesus was the decisive occasion through which God would inaugurate his kingdom (Fuller 1954:79; cf. also McKnight 2005:62). In as far as baptism signifies the eschatological event of the death and resurrection of Jesus, it is fundamentally eschatological.

4.5. Doctrine of sacraments

The Bible does not define what sacraments are, nor does it specify their number. The Greek word *mysterion* was translated in Latin by the word *Sacramentum*. '*Sacramentum*' was a well-known word, as the Roman soldier's oath of enlistment (Grün 2003: 12).

In other resources, *Sacramentum* denoted a sum of money deposited by two parties in litigation. After the decision of the court, the winner's money was returned, while that of the loser was forfeited. This seems to have been called a *Sacramentum* because it was intended to be a sort of propitiatory offering to the gods. The transition to the Christian use of the term is probably to be sought: (a) in the military use of the term, in which it denoted

the oath by which a soldier solemnly pledged obedience to his commander since in baptism the Christian pledges obedience to his Lord; and (b) in the specifically religious sense which it acquired when the Vulgate employed it as a rendering of the Greek *mysterion*. It is possible that this Greek term was applied to the sacraments because they have a faint resemblance to some of the mysteries of the Greek religions. For this very reason, some objected to the name, and preferred to speak of "signs," "seals," or "mysteries." During the 16th century Reformation, many disliked the name "sacrament." Melanchthon used *signnum,* and both Luther and Calvin deemed it necessary to call attention to the fact that the word "sacrament" is not employed in its original sense in theology (Berkhof 1949: 683).

For the ancient Latin-speaking churches, the association of baptism with initiation into the Christian community made it natural to describe the baptismal ritual, as Tertullian did, by the word *Sacramentum*, which in military parlance meant the oath of allegiance required for enlistment into the army. This was the meaning of *Sacramentum* exploited by Zwingli at the time of the Protestant Reformation. A sacrament, for him, was a profession of loyalty that identified a person with the Christian community (Gerrish 2015: 260).

Calvin explained that sacraments are "an external sign, by which the Lord seals on our consciences his promises of goodwill toward us, to sustain the weakness of our faith, and we in our turn testify our piety towards him, both before himself and before angels as well as men. We may also define more briefly by calling it a testimony of the divine favour toward us, confirmed by an external sign, with a corresponding attestation of our faith towards Him" (Calvin 2014: 66). According to Calvin, sacraments "are termed evidence of divine grace, and, as it were, seals of the good-will which God entertains toward us. They, by sealing it to us, sustain, nourish, confirm, and increase our faith" (Calvin 2014: 170-171).

More recently, the respected Reformed theologian, Jürgen Moltmann, said the following:

> "Simple sacramental actions have been a universal means of human communications. Eating together and drinking together confirm friendships in a way that supplements what words can communicate, and the same is true of a handshake or giving of a ring. Sacraments count as 'holy rites or actions' ordained by God through which saving grace is appropriated or people are given the certainty of that grace through the medium of visible signs." (Moltmann 1989: 227)

In this sense, sacraments are universal and are important in human communication. Sacramental actions have been universal in the life of the Christian Church. From the beginning, Christians practised baptism and celebrated the Lord's Supper. In addition, at that time, there were other sacramental acts such as the Church supper, the washing of the feet, the kiss of peace, and the anointing with oil. Baptism and the Lord's Supper had pre-eminence not only in the New Testament but also in the early Church (Leith 1993: 251). Sacramental practice and doctrine grew rapidly in the Middle Ages. This development was influenced by the mission of the Church to persons who could neither read nor write and for whom sacramental actions were increasingly important. Many practices acquired some sacramental status in the medieval Church. Sacramental practice and doctrine were consolidated in the theology of Thomas Aquinas and the action of the Ecumenical Council of Florence in 1439.

The word sacrament became a definite part of the ecclesiastical vocabulary, but its meaning was often changed. It is normally defined as a sacred sign instituted by Christ to give grace (Killgallon, Weber, & Ziegmann 1990: 149). Furthermore, according to John Wesley, sacraments are vehicles for salvation, meaning, "means of grace" (see Machinga 2011: 13).

“Sacraments are also ‘visible words’, embodiments of grace, enacted testimonies to the love of God in Jesus Christ” (Migliore 1991: 211).

An often-repeated definition of sacraments was formulated by Augustine, who called them ‘visible signs of an invisible grace’. The definition offered by the Westminster Shorter Catechism is much more specific: A sacrament is ‘a holy ordinance instituted by Christ wherein by visible signs Christ and the benefits of the new covenant are represented, sealed and applied to believers. Sacraments are enactments of the gospel through which the spirit of God communicates to us the forgiving, renewing, and promising love of God in Jesus Christ and enlivens us in faith, hope and love. In summary, the sacraments should be understood in a threefold manner:

The sacrament as outward or visible sign

> “Each one of the sacraments contains a material element that is palpable to the senses. In a rather loose sense this is sometimes called the sacrament. In the strict sense of the word, however, the term is more inclusive and denotes both the sign and that which is signified. To avoid misunderstanding, this different usage should be borne in mind. It explains how an unbeliever may be said to receive, and yet not to receive, the sacrament. He does not receive it in the full sense of the word. The external matter of the sacrament includes not only the elements that are used, namely, water, bread, and wine, but also the sacred rite, that which is done with these elements.” (Berkhof 1949: 617)

The sacrament as inward spiritual grace signified and sealed

Signs and seals presuppose something that is signified and sealed and which is usually called the *materia interna* of the sacrament. This is variously indicated in Scripture as the covenant of grace, Gen. 9:12,13; 17:11, the

righteousness of faith, Rom. 4:11, the forgiveness of sins, Mark 1:4; Matt. 26:28, faith and conversion, Mark 1:4; 16:16, communion with Christ in His death and resurrection, Rom. 6:3, and so on. Briefly stated, it may be said to consist in Christ and all His spiritual riches. The Roman Catholics find in it the sanctifying grace which is added to human nature, enabling man to do good works and to rise to what God expects. The sacraments signify, not merely a general truth, but a promise given unto us and accepted by us, and serves to strengthen our faith concerning the realisation of that promise, Gen. 17:1-14; Ex. 12:13; Rom. 4:11-13. They visibly represent, and deepen our consciousness of, the spiritual blessings of the covenant, of the washing away of our sins, and of our participation in the life that is in Christ, Matt. 3:11; Mark 1:4,5; I Cor. 10:2,3,16,17; Rom. 2:28,29; 6:3,4; Gal. 3:27. As signs and seals, they are means of grace, that is, means of strengthening the inward grace that is wrought in the heart by the Holy Spirit.

The sacrament as union between the sign and that which is signified

This is usually called the *forma sacramenti* (forma here meaning essence) because it is exactly the relation between the sign and the thing signified that constitutes the essence of the sacrament. According to the Reformed view, this is: (a) not physical, as the Roman Catholics claim, as if the thing signified were inherent in the sign, and the reception of the *materia externa* necessarily carried with it a participation in the *materia interna*; (b) nor local, as the Lutherans represent it, as if the sign and the thing signified were present in the same space so that both believers and unbelievers receive the full sacrament when they receive the sign; (c) but spiritual, or as Turretin expresses it, relative and moral, so that, where the sacrament is received in faith, the grace of God accompanies it (Berkhof 1949: 684).

According to this view, the external sign becomes a means employed by the Holy Spirit in the communication of divine grace. The close connection

between the sign and the thing signified explains the use of what is generally called “sacramental language,” in which the sign is put for the thing signified or *vice versa*, Gen. 17:10; Acts 22:16; I Cor. 5:7.

Divine institution

Historically, the institution of the sacraments has always been a prominent question. It is easy to see why this should be true of baptism. Baptism is one of the seven sacraments celebrated by the Catholic Church as they deal with the acts of God and men of which the mystery of divine revelation in Jesus Christ stands at the focal point. It is the second major sacrament that is virtually universally recognised throughout Christianity (McGrath 2001: 528). Among others, baptism, confirmation, Eucharist, penitence, marriage and ordination. Each of the sacraments plays an indispensable part in the life of the Church (Killgallon, Weber, & Ziegmann 1990: 151).

Sacraments are immediately related to the certainty of salvation and man’s firm foundation in belief. Since the sacraments, according to the Reformed confession, are signs and seals of God’s promise, reflection on the sacraments touches upon the reality of faith. That is why any change in the doctrine of the sacraments affects the practice of the Church directly, for the question arises immediately whether the earlier confession of the Church needs correction because of this change (Berkouwer 1969: 13). Controversies about the sacraments will influence strongly the ecumenical prospects of the Church, even today varying insights regarding the sacraments affect inter-Church relations.

> “In discussing the institution of the sacraments, we must first point out that the questions about the essence and the number of sacraments cannot be answered by starting with the meaning of the word ‘sacrament’. This word appears nowhere in the Scripture, nor is there any mention of the sacraments in general. The word *sacramentum*

> does appear in the Vulgate in Ephesians 5:32 as a translation of the Greek *mysterioin*, but this cannot help to determine the essence of the sacrament. Paul does not speak in Ephesians 5 of what we now call a sacrament. The word *mysterioin* is used in various contexts in the New Testament, and it certainly does not have the meaning of our sacraments. The word sacrament has come into use in ecclesiastical and theological language to indicate specifically religious events. Its increasing use has to do with its root meaning, which indicates the assigning of something to the deity, for example in the Roman legions or other connections … If baptism were nothing more than one of several customs and rites instituted by man to express certain religious thoughts and concepts, it could boast of a venerable tradition and would fit nicely into certain anthropological theories but it would have no decisive significance for the Christian faith." (Berkouwer 1969: 27; 90)

The decisive element of the sacrament cannot lie in what humanity does, but in what God does and grants. Precisely because throughout the centuries baptism has been directly connected with an admonition, sealing, and assurance. The institution of baptism is of primary importance, for here the question arises whether it is man who speaks, or whether it is God who comes to meet humanity with God's divine authority. Baptism was not seen as a ceremony that somehow originated in the human mind, but as an ecclesiastical rite instituted by Christ himself. Thus,

> "the Church has refused to base her confession of baptism on any psychological or historical contingencies. She has rather pointed to a certain concrete act in history, an act of Jesus Christ. Baptism, therefore, is rooted in the ministry of Jesus of Nazareth, in his death, and his resurrection. It is incorporation into Christ, who is the crucified and risen Lord; it is the entry into the New Covenant between God and

> God's people. It is a gift of God and is administered in the name of the Father, the Son, and the Holy Spirit. In Matthew gospel, it is recorded that the risen Lord, when sending his disciples into the world, commanded them to baptise (Matt. 28:18-20). The universal practice of baptism by the apostolic Church from its earliest days is attested in letters of the New Testament, the Acts of the Apostles, and the writings of the Fathers." (WCC 1982: 2)

When the Church spoke of the divine institution of baptism, she meant nothing other than the institution by Christ himself. The unanimity of the Church on this point was undoubtedly based on the clear New Testament command to baptise in Matthew 28:19. The sacraments, including baptism, are by divine institution involved with the New Covenant, with the coming of the Kingdom of God in the Messiah. Being historically founded, they are therefore also dated in the history of salvation. Baptism is a sign that proclaims the all-sufficiency of the work of Christ.

In conclusion, one can summarise the purpose of sacraments in general and baptism in particular, by borrowing what Lawrence Mick wrote:

> "The purpose of the sacraments is to sanctify people, to build up the body of Christ, and, finally, to worship God. Because they are signs they also belong in the realm of instruction. They not only presuppose faith, but by words and objects, they also nourish, strengthen, and express it. That is why they are called sacraments of faith. They do, indeed, confer grace, but, in addition, the very act of celebrating them is most effective in making people ready to receive this grace to their profit, to worship God duly, and to practice charity. It is, therefore, of the greatest importance that the faithful should easily understand the symbolism of the sacraments and eagerly frequent those sacraments

which were instituted to nourish the Christian life." (Mick 2006: 17 of 68)

4.6. Methodist understanding of baptism

The Methodist movement could be traced back to John Wesley (1703 - 1791), an Anglican preacher. Charles Wesley, John's brother, and George Whitefield were also important leaders in the Methodist movement. They were called "Methodists" because of the methodical way in which they studied the Bible and ordered their lives. The Methodist movement was mostly Arminian in their theological outlook, however, George Whitefield and several others were considered to be Calvinistic in their convictions.

Methodism was a movement within the Church of England that subsequently gave birth to the Methodist Church as a denomination in its own right. Currently, it is a section of Protestant Christianity made up of many denominations. The break with the Church of England was contrary to Wesley's intentions.

The distinctive emphasis of the early Methodists was on the need for personal holiness. The early history of English Methodism demonstrates the innate tendency to fragmentation that is characteristic of Protestantism. Divisions arose over a series of issues, including order and discipline – though not, significantly, matters of doctrine. A dispute in the northeast of England led to the "Methodist New Connection," which formed in 1797. A decade later the "Primitive Methodists" broke away, believing that the Wesleyan Connection was losing its enthusiasm for revivalism. The Bible Christian Church was founded by a Wesleyan preacher in England's west country in 1815; unusually, it made extensive use of women preachers.

Yet English Methodism also illustrates Protestantism's capacities to set past controversies behind it and to secure reconciliation. In 1857 three Methodist

groups united to form the United Methodist Free Churches; in 1907 these were incorporated, together with the New Connection and others, into the United Methodist Church; in 1932, the Wesleyans, the Primitive Methodists, and the United Methodists merged to establish the Methodist Church in Great Britain. Generally, Methodism has tended to be found primarily in English-speaking regions of the world, showing parallelism with Anglicanism in this respect. As a result of various union schemes, in various parts of the world such as Canada and Australia, Methodism has ceased to exist as a distinct denomination. The formation of the World Methodist Council has gone some way toward maintaining Methodism as a distinct entity within global Christianity (McGrath 2015: 210).

Baptism, as 'the washing of regeneration', "represents the new birth in Christ that is offered and given by the Spirit in the word of reconciliation; and since the new birth is mediated through the Christian community, whose faith is a condition but not the guarantee of faith in the one baptised, baptism is also called adoption into the family of faith or reception into the covenant people" (Gerrish 2015: 259). "Through baptism we are incorporated into the ongoing history of Christ's mission – baptism is an expression of God's love for the world, and the effects of baptism also express God's grace. As baptised people of God, we, therefore, respond with praise and thanksgiving, praying that God's will be done in our lives" (Maddox 1998: 158). The Methodist Church believe that the

> "sacrament of baptism was given to the Church by Jesus Christ. It is an outward sign of the new life that God offers to all people through the work of Christ and marks the entry of the person baptised into God's family, the Church. Baptism therefore proclaims God's grace and looks forward to life-long growth into Christ in the fellowship of the Church. It calls for the response of faith that is also a life-long process. In the case of believers, the initial profession of faith precedes baptism.

> In the case of infants, parents and sponsors who are believers promise to provide Christian nurture and to prepare the child for personal profession of faith. In both cases the person baptised will be supported by the faith of the Church." (BOO 2016: 13)

Wesley maintains that sacraments are vehicles for salvation, that is, the "means of grace" as alluded to earlier. Baptism recognises a person as a child of God's kingdom and sets his or her feet in the way of salvation. In baptism, God initiates the act of salvation and humans respond to God's activity. Baptism, as a sacrament, is an act of acceptance in which candidates recognise, receive, and begin to participate in the grace-filled life that God offers. In the Methodist tradition, baptism is viewed as:

- **Entrance into the Church:** A rite of entrance into the Christian Church, the body of Christ. Through the act of baptism, a person is initiated into a new community – a believer's first act of faith. Through this rite of passage, a person is confirmed as one of the followers of Christ, thereby joining the company of the faithful. A person becomes a member, not of a particular denomination, but the Christian community. A person is initiated into the one, holy catholic, and apostolic Church, enabling him or her to participate in the uniting bond throughout Christendom.
- **Sign of repentance:** This act entailed repentance and full confession of sins as a prerequisite to gaining membership. Closely associated with repentance is the call to renounce sin. Baptism is therefore an acknowledgement of sin and the movement towards the life of grace and reconciliation (Macquarrie 1977: 459). Baptism should not be an occasion of confession. Daniel Migliore describes it as "washing of a sin-stained life," that calls for the baptised to have a new beginning and orientation (Migliore 1993: 215).
- **Identification with Christ:** As a ceremonial act instituted by Christ (Matt. 28:19) and practised by the apostles, baptism depicts a believer's

union and identification with Jesus' death, burial, and resurrection. It has always been administered in the name of the Lord Jesus Christ (Acts 2:38; 8:16;). Paul used baptism to speak about the believer's identification with Christ (Rom. 6:1-5).

- **Holy Spirit**: To be baptised means normally to receive the Holy Spirit (Macquarrie 1977: 460). This exploration of baptism in the New Testament implies that baptism is related to the activity of the Holy Spirit. Since the character of the Church is that of a community of the Spirit, it follows that to be incorporated into the Church is to be received into the community of the Spirit. John the Baptist mentions that he was baptised with water, but the one to come after him baptises with the Spirit (Mark 1:8). At Jesus' baptism, the Spirit in the form of a dove descended on him (Luke 3:21-22; Mark 1:10; Matt. 3:16). Baptism is the work of the Holy Spirit (Machinga 2011: 13). Wesley centred his spirituality and theology on the transforming work of the Holy Spirit. God was not an object of philosophical reasoning for him, but the life-giving spirit who encounters us empowers us and dwells in us. If Jesus Christ is in us, we are experiencing the presence of his Spirit in us. And this presence of the Spirit of Jesus Christ is what enables us to participate in the Divine nature and life (Maddox 1998: 200), that is, to become true children of God.
- **Baptism and vocation:** Baptised Christians are called to participate in a life-journey of faith, commitment to Jesus' ministry and the beginning of His work.

4.7. Methodist views on prevenient grace

John Wesley taught that God is gracious and God's grace has consistently and continuously been at work. Even though Scripture tells us that Christ commanded us to baptise all nations, God can save sinners without baptism. With God, there is free and underserved grace that goes before us. There are many instances where God had saved sinners without being

baptised. This is even true with stillborn. Throughout history, stillborn might have been buried without being baptised, but this does not mean that they ran short of being 'accepted' into the presence of God or to be with the creator God. Our God is merciful.

Wesley says the saving work of Christ begins with the first dawning of grace in the soul, which he called prevenient grace (William 1988: 41). This is very critical in understanding that baptism is not an "*access card*" into the presence of God. Wesley looked at what grace means before he dealt with the whole notion of prevenient grace. He maintains that grace is grace, a person doesn't have one kind of grace for one situation and another kind for some other situation. By the same token, God does not give God's grace in bits and pieces. "We define grace in different ways because of how we experience the grace on our end of the relationship. Grace comes to us at different stages in our spiritual pilgrimage, and it accomplishes different effects and evokes different responses. But it is all grace" (Harper 1983: 40). "When Wesley speaks of prevenient grace, "he meant the grace of God which operates before our experience of conversion. It is his term for the grace of God that is active before we give conscious thought to God or our need for him. To use biblical language, it is the grace that comes while we are "still sinners" (Rom 5:8). In Wesley's theology, this action of grace is particularly important, and we need to work through it carefully" (Shelton 2014: 314 of 692).

"Prevenient grace, therefore, means 'the grace that comes before, preventing grace'" (Richardson 2018: 58). Before what? Before any conscious personal experience of divine grace. Prevenient grace explains how God precedes his gracious, early activities of salvation in various venues.

According to its theological advocates, this grace does not save by itself, it does not cause repentance, and it does not replace any need to understand the gospel. Instead, it is employed divinely to assist and lead to salvation. Prevenient grace, simply put, makes possible the freedom component that is necessary for belief.

God provides grace to humankind by Christ's death and resurrection to break this vicious cycle, enabling people to recognise his love and sacrifice in Jesus and to surrender their lives to him. After people exercise this divinely given opportunity, they can declare with Peter in Acts 15:11, "But we believe that we are saved through the grace of the Lord Jesus," because this faith is the gracious work of the Spirit enabling our free wills enough to repent. From the outset, it must be clear that this is in no way a human programme of work. Prevenient grace proposes that Christ's atoning work enlightens people in a way that natural revelation, or their fallen image of God, could not do alone (Shelton 2014: 334 of 692).

According to Calvin, prevenient grace is "preventing grace." As the name suggests, a type of grace that "prevents" the individual from resisting salvation. What Calvinism has argued, is that God's decision to save any individual is predicated not on that person's desire to be saved, but rather on the will of God. If God wants to save a person, "grace makes the person willing," (Richardson 2018: 318 of 729).

Through his doctrine of prevenient grace, Wesley was saying that the first move is God's, not man's, without this Wesley said we might have some room for boasting. Prevenient grace removes 'all imagination of merit from man'.

> "The doctrine of prevenient grace means that God takes the first step to redeem humanity. For Wesley, he allows this grace to operate in and through the human conscious. Additionally, prevenient grace is

> ‘leading grace.’ It is the operation of God that moves us to the place of repentance. He indicated that there are three ways in which prevenient grace “leads” us. First, it creates in us our first sensitivity to God’s will. Second, it produces a slight, even transient conviction of having violated His will. Third, it causes our first wish to please God. Through these experiences, Wesley believed a person would be led to the place of repentance, which was itself a step along the way to full salvation.” (Harper 1983: 42)

He also insisted that man is responsible before God for his salvation, being free to accept God or reject him. Wesley holds these two (man’s inability to move towards God and his freedom to respond to God) together, without resorting to any form of Pelagianism, by his twin doctrines of original sin and prevenient grace.

Because of original sin, the natural man is “dead to God” and unable to move towards God or respond to God. “It is through the work of prevenient grace that one is given the power to respond or resist. Prevenient grace creates within us the power to accept faith or to refuse it” (William 1988: 41). Most importantly, prevenient grace marks the beginning of God’s work of salvation and this grace is present in all human beings.

The words “prevenient grace” are not in Scripture, but there is a good biblical warrant for it. First, there is the idea that grace comes before faith. Next, there are other theological concepts such as infant grace (every child is born in a state of grace), humans are allowed to choose hell though it was created for Satan and his fallen angels, and God so loved humankind that he sent his Son to die for every individual. If God loves the world (John 3:16), sent Jesus to die for the sins of the world, not merely believers only (1 John 4:10), and humankind is dead in his trespasses and sins, then God must make a way for human beings to choose to believe and accept the gospel. There

must be divine grace if human beings must choose but can't choose on their own. What else but divine enablement could help human beings fulfil their God-given responsibility to repent and believe the gospel? (Richardson 2018: 155 of 729).

Prevenient grace is not some philosophical concept without biblical merit. With the doctrines of infant grace, universal atonement, total depravity, and the study of certain biblical persons who either feared the loss of their salvation or fell from grace, it becomes obvious that there is no irresistible grace to speak of. God enables everyone to repent and believe the gospel because God desires that all be saved. Why else would Jesus have died for the sins of all humankind if universal salvation wasn't the divine desire? The existence of total depravity in humankind doesn't necessarily lead to the idea that God selects some for Heaven and abandons some for Hell. If God enables all to repent and believe the gospel, then grace can do what persons in their efforts cannot.

The doctrines of 'infant grace' and 'infant salvation' teach us that God, in God's great love, saves children from suffering God's wrath because, at a young age, they are unable to understand right from wrong or accept or reject the gospel. Their physical and mental development is not akin to that of an adult, so they are unable to consent and, as such, cannot suffer the divine wrath because only unbelievers (those who reject the gospel) can justly suffer it. In tragic circumstances of infant or childhood death, an infant goes back to God, who created the child (Richardson 2018: 439).

Last, "Christ's death and resurrection procured for all humanity, and independent of them, is a general baptism" which is to be understood as the prevenient grace of God in action and as such fulfils the role of the objective side of baptism (Cullmann 1950: 70).

4.8. Methodist understanding of salvation

Harper (1983) explains the Wesleyan understanding of sin as follows:

> "Sin was not some mysterious spiritual entity which attached itself to human nature like a barnacle attaches itself to the hull of a ship. Instead, Wesley spoke of sin in relational terms. His classic definition is that sin is "every voluntary breach of the law of love". At its base, sin is the broken relationship, whether that brokenness is expressed towards others or towards God. And it is important to note that the breach is conscious and wilful. For Wesley, sin is not something that sneaks up on you, it arises out of you. Wesley's definition of sin involves cause and effect relationship." (Harper 1983: 29)

According to Wesley, "an order of salvation is rooted in the existence and recognition of original sin and God's response to it". According to Wesley, salvation from original sin begins with justification, continues in sanctification and ends with glorification. First, the root: original sin. Wesley pointed out that the current state of humankind is greatly changed from our original condition. God created both males and females in a perfect state. We were fashioned in the image of God and, in that image, He pronounced us good. This goodness, Wesley believed, indicated that we were free from "sin and filled with righteousness and true holiness." But we did not remain in that state. Sinning against God through disobedience, humankind fell from this position and lost "both the knowledge and love of God." Through this loss, we became unable to reflect the full image of God that we were created with, and death entered our lives. This death is understood first to occur as spiritual death, then, eventually as bodily death. It is not dependent upon our sinning, but upon our birth into the family of Adam. This fallen, sinful nature separates us from God and leaves us without hope. Original sin, therefore, is the state of humankind that cries

out for salvation. Therefore, the need for salvation is based upon the current, desperate state of humankind. From the despair found in original sin began the first step of salvation according to Wesleyan theology: of justification. Wesley observed that justification is the pardoning of our sin. It is making us righteous and just before God. It is only possible by an act of God through the atoning blood of His Son, Christ Jesus. It is not something we do for ourselves but is something God does for us.

Wesley also observed that justification is not a denial of truth, or of God deceiving us by calling us something we are not. Rather, God recognises the truth of what He has done for us through Christ. Justification is provided only for the sinner, the lost, and the ungodly. Those who are righteous before God do not need it. Good works performed after justification are just and righteous before God, because of what He has done in the heart of that believer. Any good work performed before justification was not considered by Wesley "truly and properly good." Wesley affirmed that justification can only be known by faith. It is not earned nor can it be attained in any way outside the mercies of faith (Cramer 2012: 7 of 97). Although Wesley stated that in the very moment one is justified he is born anew, he insisted that justification always precedes new birth. Wesley also believed that while one may not always immediately feel new birth, the believer can find full assurance of the justification that God has performed in one's life.

According to Wesleyan thought, justification does not reach beyond the new birth experience into the believer's life in a way that wrestles it free from the grip of sin or causes the believer to love perfectly. Rather, Wesley believed that the presence of sin in the believer's life is defeated by the next step in the order: Sanctification.

Sanctification, according to Wesley, is the process of change in a believer's life from sinfulness unto holiness. It is also the process of becoming "more

dead to sin" while we become "more and more alive to God." It should be noted, however, that this holiness is the holiness of living and is distinct from the righteousness reckoned to us by God through Christ. The holiness that we receive from God through Christ cannot be improved upon or added to. That is perfect, absolute, and effective holiness. The holiness that Wesley taught, preached, and sought to exemplify was holiness in living. It included good works, works of mercy, and a rejection of sinful living. And just as we are justified by faith, Wesley believed we are sanctified by faith. Wesley firmly held that entire sanctification is full salvation from our sins and thus what the Apostle Paul described as perfection. The third and final step Wesley saw in salvation is glorification. This is the result of our Christian life. It includes the changing of our mortal state to become "like him" (1 John 3:2). Wesley, however, saw glorification as changing not just the state of humankind but of all creation that had been corrupted by the fall of Adam. On that day, not only our salvation but the redemption of all the cosmos will be complete (Cramer 2012: 7 of 97).

Wesley viewed conversion as prompted by prevenient grace. This is God's divine love that surrounds all humanity and prompts our first awareness of God and our desire for deliverance from our sin. It is this love, Wesley believed, that moves us toward repentance and faith. After the conversion is prompted by prevenient grace, Wesley believed it is affected by justifying grace. This is God's love that pardons the repentant sinner and accepts them into God's family. He believed that the assurance of justification could be known and understood by the believer in her or his life. This assurance comes from the witness of God's Spirit with our own that "we are children of God" (Romans 8:16). Wesley lived out his theology, fully integrating the justification he received by faith with the assurance he came to recognise in his spirit. He knew assurance not as an intangible idea, but as something he experienced. Wesleyan interpretation of grace moves beyond justifying to sanctifying grace. It is grace that draws us into perfect Christianity, which

Wesley describes as having a heart filled with the love of God and our neighbours.

4.9. Methodist views on stillbirth baptism

The request for the baptism of a stillborn has its roots in the people's understanding of the concept of sin, the broken relationship with God and the need for salvation. People use Scripture to back up their arguments. Furthermore, most people work hard whilst on earth in anticipation of being received into heaven one day when they leave this earth. To them, being baptised, confirmation and other Christian rites, are stepping stones towards the new Jerusalem.

The Methodist Church of Southern Africa encourages pastoral care to parents and families of people who have experienced stillbirth. Care for the bereaved is considered part of Methodism's stewardship for God's gift. As Methodists, we do not believe or practice baptism of or for the dead. The Church subscribes to the notion that everyone is created in the image and likeness of God, and that salvation is needed and can be attained by everyone regardless of being baptised or not. For Methodists, "prevenient grace" is delivered to humans before any decision or action is made by them. This rite of baptism is reserved for the living, both infants and adults.

Romans 8: 32 says: "He who did not spare his own Son, but gave him up for us all—how will he not also, along with him, graciously give us all things?" The sacrifice that Christ made, covers everyone, including unborn and stillborn children. Baptism is not a prerequisite of "getting access to heaven when we die." In his sermon, "The Scripture Way of Salvation", John Wesley (1838: Loc 48 of 85) begins with these words:

> "And, first, let us inquire, what is salvation? The salvation which is here spoken of is not what is frequently understood by that word, the going

> to heaven, eternal happiness. It is not the soul's going to paradise, termed by our Lord, 'Abraham's bosom.' It is not a blessing which lies on the other side death; or, as we usually speak, in the other world. The very words of the text itself put this beyond all question: "Ye are saved." It is not something at a distance: it is a present thing; a blessing which, through the free mercy of God, ye are now in possession of. Nay, the words may be rendered, and that with equal propriety, "Ye have been saved": so that the salvation which is here spoken of might be extended to the entire work of God, from the first dawning of grace in the soul, till it is consummated in glory."
>
> (https://www.whdl.org/sites/default/files/publications/EN_John_Wesley_043_Scripture_way_of_salvation_0.pdf)

God's work of salvation, says Wesley, is about all God does to save us, starting with and primarily in this life. Baptism, according to Wesley, is the "ordinary instrument of our justification (Outler 1964: 321). It means for us, baptism is where justification begins for most of us, and that it is a sure and certain means of beginning God's justifying (and so sanctifying) work in us. It does not rule out that God may begin such work in us by other means.

4.10. Conclusion

Christian doctrine claims that humanity inherit a tainted nature and a proclivity to sin through the fact of birth. Which makes stillborn babies tainted irrespective of their nature. This does not imply that God has elected some people to receive salvation. Baptism should be celebrated and be regarded as universal and important in human communication. Among the Wesleyan tradition, sacraments are vehicles for salvation, that is, the "means of grace". They signify, not merely a general truth, but a promise given unto us and accepted by us, and serves to strengthen our faith concerning the realisation

of that promise, Gen. 17:1-14 - A means employed by the Holy Spirit in the communication of divine grace.

The Methodist Church believe that baptism was given to the Church by Jesus Christ. An outward sign of the new life that God offers to all people through the work of Christ and marks the entry of the person baptised into God's family, the Church. Baptism therefore proclaims God's grace and looks forward to life-long growth into Christ in the fellowship of the Church. It is clear from this explanation that we stillborn baptism is not relevant as those who are baptised are to participate in the life of the church as active participants in the body of Christ and respond in faith. Stillborn are covered, according to John Wesley, in the understanding of God's prevenient grace – With God, there is free and underserved grace that goes before us.

Methodist church does not believe or practice baptism of or for the dead as there is no theological or scriptural evidence to support this practice. The Church subscribes to the notion that everyone is created in the image and likeness of God, and that salvation is needed and can be attained by everyone regardless of being baptised or not.

5. THE AFRICAN CONTEXT

5.1. Introduction

Celebrating baptism in the African context has some consequences as it involves the need to study initiation in African Traditional Religion and how best to incorporate the initiatory process and forms. In Africa, for instance, baptism involves a process of learning and growth that touches not only the newly baptised but also the entire Church. It does not only affect the candidate to be received in the stages of the Church's life, but also the entire community of believers. "A person's life in the Christian community involves interactions and socialization in the cultural context of the individual". Socialisation has always affected humanity, and thus all of us as human beings, the environment we live in gives us our identity which ultimately bring about the formation of a unique culture, tradition and liveliness that defines us.

Therefore, one cannot begin to talk about African understanding of baptism without first dealing with cultural beliefs, customs and traditions of African people. The issue of ancestral veneration, their role with the living, and the similarities between Sesotho cultural initiation of circumcision and Christian baptism. Later I will engage in African understanding of living in the community by unpacking the African concept of *Ubuntu*.

5.2. The origins of African Religion

John Mbiti highlights "the centrality of the African Traditional Religion in African society, maintaining that this religion: its beliefs and practices, and how they affect the African community is the key to understanding the Africans and their world; which they strongly believe to be permeated by the presence of the sacred" (Mbiti 1969: 1-2). This implies that, "for Africans, religion plays a vital role in their everyday life activities. "Religion is the means by which the black person realises their aspirations towards

freedom, justice and success." (Isizoh 1998: 47). "The element of sacred symbols in this religion, plays a key role to the understanding of its nature and unique place in the life of the African. If any of the traditional beliefs, attitudes, practices and symbolic values are ignored, they can only lead to a lack of understanding of African behaviour and problems" (Mbiti 1969: 2). For Africans, religion is a yardstick for the interpretation of their vision of the world that embraces the world beyond, the concept of God, relationship with God and fellow human beings in the society. It is understood that, African Traditional Religion is not individualistic in its approach, but rather communal (Igwegbe 1995: 40).

"African traditional religion is considered to be, a worldview" (Hammond-Tooke 1981:22). This indicates that religion is about the whole of life, and not a compartmentalised aspect of it. In Africa, there is no distinction made between the religious and secular life, or between spiritual and material at least, in practice. It is safe to say, religion impregnates the whole life of the African. In other words, their life is an indication that the world of the African, is a single whole and constantly animated in every way by religion, its rites, offerings, sacrifices and invocations. Thus, for Africans, religion is not merely a religious system with creed, moral code and liturgy; rather, it is an institution in which one has his whole life (Mawusi 2015: 115).

In addition, Mogoba maintains that it is "embodied in the lifestyle of people," (Mogoba 1981:53). It doesn't matter where an African is, "there is his religion: he carries it to the fields where he is sowing seeds or harvesting a new crop; he takes it with him to the beer party or to attend a funeral ceremony; and if he is educated, he takes religion with him to the examination room at school or in the university; if he is a politician he takes it to the house of parliament. Although many African languages do not have a word for religion as such, it nevertheless accompanies the individual from long before his birth to long after his physical death" (Mbiti 1990:2).

> “For many Africans, more than anything else, religion colours the Africans’ empirical involvement in the universe and thus making life an intensely religious spectacle. To be is to be religious in a religious universe. This is the philosophical understanding that underlines African myths, proverbs, oral traditions, symbolic values, customs, traditions, beliefs, morals, ethics and social relationships. In addition, as far as history is concerned, this traditional religious attitude maintains almost absolute domination over African concepts and experiences of life.” (Mbiti 1975: 262)

In Africa, religion and culture co-exist, there is a mutual relationship, exerting influence on human beings; and at the same time, stimulating personal and communal activities in society. This, therefore, means that African Traditional Religion is “inherently holistic.” (Igwegbe 1995: 40). “This feeling of wholeness is an important aspect of African life. The religion infiltrates every crucial aspect of the African life, namely: marriage, birth, naming ceremony, initiation rite, illness, healing, and death. In the African Traditional Religion, one could hardly distinguish the secular from the sacred, the religious and the non-religious, the spiritual and the material areas of life because both of them are interwoven” (Mbiti 1969: 2). The other interesting dynamic is that, “African religion and spirituality are connected; it is very difficult to make a distinction between these two. Both are intimately part of an African way of life, especially that, the spirituality is part of the human personality; it is pre-eminently part of the African personality" (Shorter 1978:4). Shorter maintains that

> “African religion displays a commitment to a world of the spirit and to human community. These commitments imply a revolt against materialism and against shallow religiosity, against cultural passivity and being a mere consumer. It is against a purely internal religion, a

religion that is inward looking and oblivious of the community.” (Shorter 1978:7-8)

These characteristics are not shared by many forms of modern Christianity, which often reveal a lack of commitment to "the spiritual" and to the human community, and show signs of "shallow religiosity", "passivity", "consumerism" and an emphasis on "internal religion". It must be noted, there were no founders of African Religion as there have been no reformers, preachers or missionaries to change it, improve it, or take it overseas to other continents. Changes affecting African Religion have sprung up out of the historical changes in the lives of the people concerned.

Therefore, African religion developed slowly through many centuries as this was brought up by people responding to the situations of their life and reflecting upon their experiences. Many factors such as the geographical environment - mountains, rivers, deserts and forests - the change of the seasons, natural catastrophes, diseases, birth and death, and major historical events like wars, famines, migrations and so on, have played a part in its development. Added to this, “is man's reflection on the universe, the questions about its origin, the earth and the sky, the problem of evil and suffering, the phenomena of nature, and many others” (Mbiti 2015: 16). Mbiti states that, “Religious ideas and practices arose and took shape in the process of man's search for answers to these questions, and as ways of making human life safer and better. They were influenced by human experience and reflection. No doubt many of the ideas and practices were later abandoned when they were found to be inadequate. But, as time went on, these ideas and practices increased in number and spread as the people increased and dispersed. Many religious ideas and practices sprang up simultaneously in different parts of the continent, while others spread through contact among the different societies. For this reason, we find both

similarities and differences in African Religion all over the continent." (2015: 16).

> "Taking Africa as a whole, there are in reality five component elements that go into the making of African traditional religion. These are belief in God, belief in the divinities, belief in spirits, belief in ancestors and the practice of magic and medicine, each with its consequent attendant cult." (Idown 1973: 139).

For hundreds and thousands of years, this religion has been part of the African heritage.

> "African Religion is the product of the thinking and experiences of our forefathers and mothers, that is men, women and children of former generations. They formed religious ideas, they formulated religious beliefs and observed religious ceremonies and rituals, they told proverbs and myths which carried religious meanings, and they evolved laws and customs which safeguarded the life of the individual and the community… The earliest records of African history show that the Africans of ancient Egypt were very religious people. Until this day, Africans who live according to their traditional ways are said to be very religious… For many years, religion has been for Africans the normal way of looking at the world and experiencing life itself. For that reason, it is found wherever people are at." (Mbiti 2015: 14)

Mbiti (1990: 1-5) also gives some basic tenets of African religion. He maintains that "religion is the strongest element in the traditional background, and exerts probably the greatest influence upon the thinking and living of the people concerned. African Religion functions more on a communal than an individual basis because its beliefs are held by the community; therefore, it does not matter much whether or not the individual

accepts all these beliefs. Ceremonies are performed mainly in or by a group of the family, by relatives, by the whole population of one area or by those engaged in a common occupation. African Religion is an essential part of the way of life of each people. Its influence covers all of life, from before the birth of a person to long after he has died" (Mbiti 2015: 15).

> "Since African Religion belongs to the people, no individual member of the society concerned can stand apart and reject the whole of his people's religion. To do so would mean to cut himself off from the total life of his people… African Religion is very pragmatic and realistic. It is applied to a situation as the need arises. The followers of African Religion are not compelled by any authority which goes back in history as they follow it as it has been handed down to them by former generations, changing whatever is necessary in order to suit their everyday circumstances of life." (Mbiti 2015: 17)

5.3. Ubuntu

It is customary among many African people that, even after death, the vital participation of the living dead ("*Badimo*" as Basotho refers to) is experienced in the community in general and in the home and clan circles.

Ancestral tradition is a major issue among many African communities. The veneration of deceased parents and forebears constitutes a key aspect of African religions. Some traditions regard ancestors as equal if not superior to the deities within the pantheon. Furthermore, is not always easy to make a distinction between ancestors and divinities.

> "Other traditions focus on ancestral veneration because it remains instrumental to lineage, clan, and family formations. We believe as black Africans that, when our beloved elders, having transcended the human realm, occupy a higher realm of existence and are equipped to

bequeath honours and blessings on the living members of their lineage, but of course the blessings are from God. A reciprocal relationship links the living and the dead." (Olupona 2014: 28)

Within the Sesotho culture, death is seen as going on a journey home. So, the grave is even expressed in an old Sesotho hymn as *thari e tla mpepang… '*a vehicle that carries one away to after-life*'.* So, a burial becomes an enactment in reverse of the first coming out of the people. The dead were buried sitting on their haunches with utensils and accoutrements they used in life. Men with all their warrior gear, their spears and assegais, and women with their dishes and hoes, mats and water pitchers. Seeds were also buried or put in the grave as a means to plant for more food. The parting words were words of farewell to one who goes on a journey with the prospect of meeting those who have gone before, their acquaintances. This will be followed with "Remember us where you go" – Ask them (ancestors) to send us rain, food and grain. It is understood that the dead go to *mosima o sa tlaleng,* a 'hole that never gets filled', out of which the first inhabitants of this earth were led (Setiloane 1986: 7). Life there is understood to be ideal and desirable. It is seen as a world of mists with green fields, cattle grazing and people living in ease and harmony. It is believed that the life 'down there' (in the world of the living dead) has control and power of the life here above' on earth, the surface of the earth. Following the burial, the family will have a time of respite from the scorching of the sun and feverish disease cutting people off in the prime time of life.

Ritual offerings are given in exchange for blessings from the ancestors. This is done by the living as they prepare to slaughter an animal and organise African "homemade" traditional beer as an offering to the ancestors. The community is then invited to come join the family in a generous and magnificent feast. Contrariwise, neglect of a lineage's ancestors can lead to misfortune, illness, and or even death. A prime example of the intimate

interaction between the living and the ancestors is the involvement of the ancestors in rites of passage for the living, such as naming, puberty, marriage, and death. We believe that this transition cannot be accomplished without the assistance and support of the ancestors, since evil forces, personified as malevolent spirits, could otherwise disrupt the event and adversely affect the continued existence of human life and the cosmic order. The ancestors' blessing wards off disruptive forces and thus guarantees success (Olupona 2014: 22).

In African indigenous religions, the principal deities, spirits, gods, ancestors, and personal and impersonal forces are regarded as active agents in the created world, with theistic and nontheistic notions of supernatural forces embedded in the various cosmologies. African pantheons of gods, goddesses, spirits and other nonhuman beings are varied in number and complex in character. Deities inhabit a world primarily created for humans, and they exert extraordinary influence over day-to-day human affairs.

The relationship between the many gods and the Supreme God varies from region to region, from people to people. Some African cosmogonies envision the Supreme God as the highest and most powerful being, prior to everything else and of unknown origins or self-genesis (Olupona 2014: 20).

Scholars see African religion as purely monotheistic … They argue that Africans recognize the existence of one supreme, transcendental Being, who is believed to be the creator of the world and of mankind, with myriads of hierarchically structured beings, who act as his ministers and mediators with the human folk, namely the spirits and the ancestors (Smith 1926).

Setiloane asserts that behind African beliefs and actions, lies a fundamental experience, a feeling of the existence of Something or Somebody beyond oneself, a mysterious "Power which cannot be seen and is not fully understood, but which is at work in the world" (McVeigh 1974).

The term “Supreme God” is a different use of the word “god.” In many African ethnic groups, the ultimate deity is considered a supernatural being much like those associated with natural phenomena. This title references two complementary theistic notions. First, the term means “universal god,” a god who is associated with the entire world rather than pinned to one particular location. A second interpretation renders as “god of the universe.” Both concepts suggest that this entity is “supreme” in that its stewardship extends over and throughout the earth. The Supreme Being (God) remains the most significant superhuman entity in African religions, even though, in practical matters, emphasis is placed on seeking assistance from other deities. This is because the Supreme Being is usually seen as the engineer of fate and the originator of causality. While other deities and spirits can intervene in the course of events, it is God that ultimately determines their outcome. “The premier deity may also be seen as a divine principle embodying the idea of life, abundance, and the blessings of human procreation and agricultural fertility” (Olupona 2014: 22).

Among the Sotho-Tswana of South Africa, we have a complex notion of God. According to Setiloane, *Modimo* (the Supreme Being) is intangible and genderless. Its primary manifestation is as the mystical sky, and as a result it is associated with the direction of “above.” *Modimo* is a singular ‘Supreme Entity’ whose presence permeates all things but is not perceived directly through the senses (Setiloane 1986: 27). *Modimo* is regarded as the source of all, a self-generating entity that enables creation to emerge. The Sotho-Tswana also refer to *Modimo* as a mother, noting the nurturing that it provides. This does not seem to gender this supernatural force but rather describes the tenderness it has for human beings. This entity also extends goodness to human beings and embodies justice. Ultimately, *Modimo* is everywhere and extends into every realm of life (Olupona 2014: 26).

It is for these said reasons stated above that, it is very crucial in the life of Africans that, ancestors are forever given their place in their everyday lives. This begins when a child is born, through the many rites of passage we embark on, to a point when we lose our lives through death. This is an ongoing relationship between the living and the dead, with the latter playing a vital role among the living. This means that, in traditional African societies, there is an inextricable bond between man, ancestors and whatever is regarded as the Supreme Being. The departed remain part of the community. The community transcends the border of life and death (Vervliet 2009: 23). This is captured nicely by Mbiti in his philosophy on the concept of *Ubuntu*; by asserting that, “we are because we belong.”

Ubuntu can be described as the capacity in African culture to express compassion, reciprocity, dignity, humanity and mutuality in the interests of building and maintaining communities with justice and mutual caring (see Khoza 2006:6; Luhabe 2002:103; Mandela 2006:xxv; Tutu 1999:34-35). “*Ubuntu* highlights that quality about a person which elevates him to a plane very near to godliness" (Mogoba 1981:56).

Africans foster very optimistic anthropology; *ubuntu* expects the best, hopes for the best and brings out the best in people. In the opinion of South African scholar Joe Teffo (1995b), "*ubuntu/botho* is the common spiritual ideal by which all black people South of the Sahara give meaning to life and reality" it is the nucleus of "the spiritual foundation of all African societies". It "affirms an organic wholeness of humanity, a wholeness realised in and through other people" (Villa-Vicencio 1997:38). Furthermore, Motshekga maintains that its historical origins can be traced to the ancient "African philosophy of unity in diversity" - a "philosophy of unity or oneness of the whole of creation" (1998:24) - which presumably originated long ago in Egypt and Ethiopia (1998:4).

This beautiful African philosophy “embraces every human being, all races and nations - uniting them into a new universal family, where individuals, families, communities and nations would discover the vital fact that: they are an integral part of each other” (Koka 1998:34). According to Broodryk (1997), “*ubuntu* philosophy promotes flexibility rather than stability, it embraces plurality, and it highlights the importance of the extended family, nurtures and exacts the skills of how to relate properly" (Mfutso-Bengo 2001:51). “It is a process and philosophy which reflects the African heritage, traditions, culture, customs and beliefs, and has represented the "moral guideline of traditional life for centuries" (Broodryk 1997).

This philosophy is also reflected in the proverb: “*Umuntu ngumuntu ngabantu”*, where: *umuntu* (noun), is the singular for “human being, person”; *ngumuntu* (verb), means “is a person, becomes a person” “*nga*” is a prefix meaning, “through, by means of”, “*abantu*”, is the plural of “*umuntu*”, thus meaning “persons”. *Ubuntu* itself means humanity, human nature (Moloketi 2009:243; Tutu 2004:25-26).

“*Uluntu*, the Xhosa-word for “community”, and “*umuntu”* (person) are related to the same root. The complementarity of *umuntu* (“the person”) and “*uluntu*” (the community) is said to be inherent to African society, as is demonstrated by the fact that both words are derived from the same root. As such, *Ubuntu* is part of an encompassing movement of reappraisal of the African 'heritage', which has grown throughout the nineties. According to the *Ubuntu* philosophy, human beings achieve their fullness in the community” (Vervliet 2009: 21).

5.4. Human contact and the relationship with Ancestors

> “Every African society has ways of establishing and maintaining contact between human beings and the ancestors. These include the pouring of libation, giving formal and informal offerings (mainly of

> food), making sacrifices, propitiating, praying and fulfilling a request made by the ancestors. These acts serve as a means of contact, communion and fellowship; they are a token that the ancestors have not been forgotten, they symbolise welcome and hospitality towards the ancestors; they serve as a means of appeasement if the ancestors have been offended and angered; and they are the "goods" which a person renders to another when asking for a favour, since the ancestors may act as intermediaries between God and humanity." (Mbiti 1970: 267)

The offering or sacrifices may be taken from the property which the ancestors once "owned", and as such, they are being given to the "owner".

> "Ancestors are taken as stepping stones towards God, the intermediaries through whom humanity contact God. For minor matters, these acts of contact are directed only to the spirits concerned, but for major concerns of life, they are meant ultimately to reach God, whether he is mentioned on every occasion or not. These are acts and concepts that belong to the body of African religious consciousness. African people are extremely sensitive to the existence of the spirit world which presses hard upon that of human beings. The spirit world is as real as the physical world, cannot be excluded from the African ontology." (Mbiti 1970: 268)

5.5. Birth and the introduction to ancestors (*kuruetso*)

In African communities, it is held that a person is made up of body and spirit. There are other parts, but these two are the main ones. They have to be joined together to make a living person. It is not known exactly when the soul joins the body. "Among some people, it is believed that this takes place when the husband and wife sleep together at the conception of the child-to-be. In others, it is thought that the soul joins the body sometime before birth,

or shortly after birth. There are even places where it is believed that a person has two souls or spirits, one of which may wander about when he is asleep" (Mbiti 2015: 122-124).

On welcoming the new baby to the clan, it is required that a sheep be sacrificed to the ancestors as a thanksgiving offering for the newly born child. This is a time for the newborn to be introduced to the living dead and to be incorporated into the family at large, a name is given and for the blood to be spilt. The whole ceremony is an expression of gratitude to the ancestors and asks for their continued protection of the child. The community is invited to join in the feast.

5.6. Basotho circumcision ritual

One of the main initiation rites in the African cultural traditions is that of circumcision for boys. This is practised in many parts of Africa and is highly treasured in traditional life. Furthermore, it is a trial of bravery and stoicism, as no anaesthetic is used; the initiate must suffer in silence (Mandela 1994:25). "It is a wide-world phenomenon. The ritual of the removal of the foreskin in diverse traditional cultures could be a sign of civilisation in the sense that human society acquired the ability to control, through education and religion, the age at which sexual intercourse could begin" (Morris 1999: 12). It involves cutting off the foreskin of the boy's male organ. In this case, blood is spilt, and the operation is very painful since often no pain-killing herbs or other preparations are used.

Where the custom is followed, everyone must undergo it, for without it a person is still considered to be a child, no matter how old he might be, and it is shameful to be isolated from one's age-mates through lack of this experience. This form of initiation takes place bi-semester, annually, while in other areas it is a biennial event or even less frequent. It is also very much a community and public affair. Therefore, the whole community makes a

great occasion out of it. All the necessary preparations are carried out, the boys due for the initiation are told in good time, everyone talks about it and waits for it with joy (Mbiti 2015: 97).

Within the South African context, an initiation is a cultural activity that is celebrated as the stage of human development by many even in the whole of Africa. This rite of passage, *'lebollo',* is a cultural and traditional practice that transitions boys in society to manhood. This rite of passage is where '*bashemane'* (boys) pass puberty and enter adulthood to become *banna* (men) by circumcision. This practice is commonly found among Basotho men in predominantly Sotho speaking communities like in the Free State province of South Africa and the Kingdom of Lesotho.

In some communities, it is not advisable for a male to stay uninitiated – in other words, uncircumcised – especially in rural areas or where tradition is still highly upheld. An uninitiated male will not be taken seriously in discussion groups or where important decisions need to be made.

Prior to initiation and circumcision, boys are not yet regarded as accomplished 'persons', but are rather perceived as sub-human beings. They are always addressed in derogatory terms and called *bashemane* (boys) or *dintja* (dogs). One only suffices for manhood and acceptance as a human being in society after attending an initiation school and undergoing circumcision (Guma 2001:274).

Second, during this act, blood is spilt. The blood is shed which binds the person to the land and consequently to the departed members of his society. It says that the individual is alive and that he now wishes to be tied to the community and people, among whom he has been born as a child. This circumcision blood is like making a covenant, or a solemn agreement, between the circumcised and his people. Until the individual has gone

through the operation, he is still an outsider. Once he has shed his blood, he joins the stream of his people, he becomes truly one with them.

Third, the initiation allows the young person to be prepared for marriage. The mysteries and secrets of married life are normally revealed to the young people at this point to prepare them for what is soon to come (Mbiti 2015: 99). Nobody is allowed to get married before going through initiation.

Fourth, it is an initiation that also bridges the male with the female; fatherhood with motherhood; since it signals the official permission for one to get married and bear children. It also joins the living with the departed, the visible with the invisible, because after initiation a person may perform religious rituals.

Fifth, initiation is a mark of solemn unity and identification. Through it, the individual is sealed to his people and his people to him. This is a deeply religious step because during the initiation ceremonies and after, the leaders in charge offer sacrifices or prayers to God and ask for God's blessings upon the young people (Mbiti 2015: 99-100).

> "During the act of circumcision or any cultural event, ancestors are always invited to be present to bless and witness the occasion. From that occasion onwards, the initiated boys will forever bear the scars of what is cut on their organs, and these will be scars of identity. Through the scars, the initiated are henceforth identified as members of such and such a people. Without that identification scar, they cannot be fully integrated with their people." (Mbiti 2015: 101)

Sixth, the spirit of the community is renewed through this periodic initiation with all the feasting that goes with it. The entire community is brought

together; the departed, the living and those yet to be born because now the gate for marriage and family life is opened for the initiates (Mbiti 2015: 102).

> "The Basotho boys consider initiation as an important and exciting part of their upbringing, without which they could not participate in some social activities and affairs. A great deal of mystery surrounded the initiation school, which took place in a lodge '*mophato*' built at a secluded place in the mountains, and boys did not know what to expect. Before missionaries introduced schools, education took place during initiation, marking the passage to adulthood. The missionaries objected to initiation, and it became rare during colonial years, except among the '*Tlokoa'* in the mountains. In recent years, however, it has seen a major resurgence, and most young people today are initiated." (https://southafrica.co.za/basotho-initiation-rituals.html, viewed 11 August 2021)

The Sotho initiation of circumcision begins with embarking on cultural rites and festivities that last three days before the event. This involves close family members. At the end of the third day an animal is slaughtered, usually, a black bull, and initiates are given lots of chunk pieces of meat cut from its right foreleg and shoulder coated with herbal medicine. Then the boys will be ushered out of the village to a secluded place where the rite of passage will be performed (Roediger 2011).

The initiate practice can be classified into three stages: the separation stage, the transitional stage, and the incorporation stage. During the separation stage, boys are separated from all social activities and kept in a secluded place where their transition from adolescence into adulthood takes place. The initiate is expected to undergo rigorous training. He is not to do anything on his own initiative, the curriculum is designed for that candidate and he is supposed to follow the syllabus that is outlined for him and at the

end, he knows what to become. In the traditional society, the initiate is expected to put himself at the beck and call of the elders and obey without question. The elders have unquestioned authority over the novices, based on their personifications of tradition. It is absolute authority calling for absolute obedience. These elders represent the absolute value of society where the common good and the general interest are supreme (Turner 1982: 100).

Second, in the transitional stage, the initiates are educated on the social concepts of their identities. “This is the situation when one is neither a boy/girl nor man/woman. Victor Turner refers to as betwixt and between. It is variously referred to as the liminal threshold or intermediate stage” (Turner 1982: 5).

After the physical circumcision, the boys' open wound is dressed with a special plant that aids healing. For about eight days after the surgical procedure, a traditional nurse provides nursing care, redresses wounds daily, and takes care of the young men. Traditional bandages are used for dressing the wounds of the initiates. The initiates rise early each day to perform a variety of tasks and undergo a harsh physical regimen. Skills, such as warfare and cattle-raiding are taught and improved. The initiates are also tutored on the knowledge of family life, including sexuality, which is dealt with extensively. On completion of their training, the initiates leave all their clothing behind in the lodge, which is then set alight by the instructors. The young men then run without looking back at their childhood, which symbolically ends with the burning of the lodge. The initiates arrive at their villages smeared with red ochre and covered in traditional Basotho blankets while surrounded by men and elders, where they are given a new set of clothes. A large feast commences shortly thereafter and each new initiate is allowed to verbalise his self-composed praise.

Third, the incorporation stage - which occurs when the newly initiated Basotho men are incorporated into society. They are given new names, which are selected for each individual and confirms the "man's existence", as well as blankets to wear as proof that they have reached manhood. Sometimes the names given after initiation become more popular than the names given at birth. Initiates are then allowed to participate in social and economic activities. This is a stage when one is eventually assimilated into the new status of men and women. The rite of incorporation according to the traditional method is actual and relevant for there is assimilation. Assimilation of the social and religious norms by the initiate, and assimilation of the initiate by the community. The method is life centred and life engendering (Turner, 1982: 5).

Having undergone the initiatory instructions and accomplished the orders and guidelines, the initiate is believed to be as …. one new born or resuscitated, he is a man who knows, who has learnt the mysteries, who has heard revelations that are metaphysical in nature… He is now acknowledged as one who has learnt the sacred secrets about life, eligible for marriage and to propagate new life armed with what society considers the necessary instructions for life. He can be called to participate in elderly community debates and be invited into some community advisory meetings. He is also in communion with the ancestors having died to the profane world and risen to the sacred existence. Initiation usually comprises a threefold revelation of the sacred, of death and of sexuality. The child knows nothing of these experiences, the initiate knows and assumes them and incorporates them into his new personality (Elide 1986: 188).

The newly initiated begins a new life where they put to practice what they learned to bear witness to his transformed self, they must demonstrate that he has found his essential wholeness as an individual and as a man in a community (Monk, 1973: 3). “Among those he shares ideals, purpose and

experience, he will have passed through a door" (Marton 1981: 18), leading from one place of existence to another, from the profane world to the sacred one.

5.7. Ancestral Veneration

The Sesotho speaking people do not worship ancestors, they honour and pay their respect to them. God is still regarded as the Supreme Being that they believe in and God is most commonly referred to as *Modimo*. Furthermore, "*Modimo* is approached through the spirits of one's ancestors (*badimo*), who are honoured at ritual feasts. Basotho believe that the ancestral spirits can bring sickness and misfortune to those who forget them or treat them disrespectfully. Today, Christianity in one form or another is accepted by most of the Sotho-speaking people. Many Churches combine elements of African traditional religion with the doctrines of Christianity.

Ancestral tradition, the veneration of deceased parents and forebears, constitutes a key aspect of African religions. Some traditions regard ancestors as equal if not superior to the deities within the pantheon; also, it is not always easy to make a distinction between ancestors and divinities. Other traditions centralise ancestral veneration because it remains instrumental to lineage, clan, and family formations. Ancestors, having transcended the human realm, occupy a higher realm of existence and are equipped to bestow honours and blessings on the living members of their lineage. "Ritual offerings are given in exchange for blessings from the ancestors. Africans believe that *Modimo* (God) acts through *Badimo* (ancestors) yet God is readily available to those in need. The normal way in which God acts is through the ancestors. The *badimo* (ancestors) are known to be the intermediators" (Kombo 2007: 192). "Conversely, neglect of a lineage's ancestors can lead to misfortune, illness, and even death" (Olupona 2014: 28).

Badimo are an active participant in daily life, and ensure the good ordering of social relationships among the living, and the fertility and wellbeing of humankind, crops, and animals.

“They have a strong influence on the community of the living. They are approached first before all important undertakings” (Krige 1974:289). “The customary means through which the living come into contact with the ancestors is sacrifice (Ellenberger 1992:258), which is why sacrifice plays such a significant role in many rituals.” Usually, “there is a set of predetermined procedures for sacrificial ceremonies” (Krige 1974:292-296; Moila 1987:82).

> “In return, they expect service (*tshebëlëtsö*), and approaching them should follow proper channels of deference. Such belief systems highlight the importance of one's *sebôkô*, or family line, as it provides a direct link with *badimo*, who literally sustains life, and must be shown proper respect to ensure success and wellbeing.”
>
> (see https://africa.uima.uiowa.edu/peoples/show/South+Sotho)

They are believed, because of their closeness to God in the spirit-world, and living as invisible members of the living community, they are capable of entering into individual human beings or animals, and to possess anthropomorphic features such as the capacity to consume earthly food or drinks, hence during ancestral celebrations, food is prepared and placed at the certain place in the house overnight. This is in form of traditional beer, uncooked meat, cakes and all other food items including tobacco and snuff. It is believed that, during the night when all are asleep, it is the opportunity for ancestors to come and bless the celebration and have the first bite of the prepared food. It must also be noted that not all dead people are recognised as ancestors. The basic criterion is that

> "ancestorship centres on natural relationship which is either consanguineous or non-consanguineous, secondly, an ancestor is a model of behaviour, not because of the excellence of his earthly life conduct, but because his or her conduct was such that it is seen as having been endowed with a supernatural condition and power." (Nyamiti 1984: 49)

"The Africans believe that the dead ancestors are grand elders who, during their earthly lives, have lived a good and exemplary life" (Obiakoizu 1979:56). "A good life according to African traditional moral standards, is also a precondition to attaining such status as no one is revered as an ancestor unless the one led a morally good life on earth; for an ancestor is also a model of behaviour for the living. The ancestors are believed to be the source of tradition and its stability" (Nyamiti 1984: 15).

It must be acknowledged that "the ancestral veneration still represents a bone of contention in the dialogue between African tradition and Christianity" (Parrat 1995:135). Many African theologians have attempted to address the problems surrounding the issue, but little has been accomplished.

5.8. African understanding of Community

African way of life favours communalism (community or collectivism) above individualism. This is evident that, even African legal procedures emphasise the responsibility of the group rather than the individual, and that community rights are elevated above individual rights (Mönnig 1988: 308).

> "This has also "got praises and affirmation from Pope John Paul VI in his letter *Africa Terrarium* (Hickey 1982: 181). African theology makes much of community. A human person's worth inheres and is rooted in belonging. This belonging is dynamic as interacting with other beings

> in and with the cosmos. "*For the Bantu* (as with other Africans) beings, maintain intimate on the relationships with one another". So, Community life is a central African element that should be jealously preserved. Bishop Christopher Mwoleka has exclaimed that: “If in the Catholic Church there is something faulty with our methods of presenting the message of the Gospel or good news, it is this; we have not presented religion as a sharing of life.” (Mwoleka; 1978: 123)

Teffo argues that *ubuntu/botho* is "the spiritual foundation of all African societies" (Teffo 1995b). Thereby the community is raised to a pedestal of almost immaculate proportions. The community, it seems, can become seen as the focal point and source of all spirituality. Unwavering respect of and obedience to adults, parents, seniors and any kind of other authority is expected. This implies a stratified, even hierarchical, structure underlying the society” (Sidhom 1969:106; Mönnig 1988:322).

Menkiti, in his article ‘*African Traditional Thought*’, maintains that “the African view of a man denies that persons can be defined by focusing on this or that physical or psychological characteristic of the lone individual. Rather man is defined by the reference to the environing community (Menkiti 171).

> “This view is further articulated or held by Mbiti, when he changes Descartes’ *dictum* to “I belong, therefore I am”. There maintains that there is no person who does not belong as belonging is the root and essence of being. The whole system of African society and the ordering thereof is based on this. Everyone has someone that belongs to, who should reap the benefit of their life or take on the responsibilities which arise out of that life.” (Setiloane 1986: 10)

Furthermore, David Spitz affirms that “a man is what he is by virtue of the fact that he was born into, raised in, a community” (Spitz 1982: 7). The African sense of community extends far beyond family, clan, tribe or nationality. It is

also believed in African communities that, the living community is also connected to those who have departed from this life.

> "In African Religion, a person takes basic identity from the community. The notion of man as a spiritual being also pervades the *Ubuntu* philosophy. At the same time, man as a spiritual being does not stand alone as an isolated individual but is integrated into a wider whole." (Vervliet 2009: 23)

There is a famous Sesotho saying: "*Ngwana o hodiswa ke setjhaba*." Loosely translated it means "it takes a village to raise a child". In the African mind, if an individual does not identify with the social structure, that individual is not a person. In the African view, "it is the community that defines the person and not some isolated static quality of rationality, will or memory" (Menkiti 172). An individual may or may not be a person, even though he is human. He further asserts that, as human being beings, we are fundamentally relational animals whose experiences are regulated by norms that reflect this primary condition. His view "normative conception of a person" (Menkiti 2004: 324), spells out the moral meaning or connotation, to the now-widely referred to expression originally attributed to Mbiti as mentioned earlier, that is; "I am because we are", or used recently with reference to its reframing by Arch Bishop Tutu, "*Umuntu ngumuntu ngabantu*" (persons becomes persons through other persons). One becomes a person, through the movement of an individual human child into personhood and beyond. This is essentially a journey from childhood to adulthood (Menkiti 2004: 325).

6. STRATEGIC PERSPECTIVES

6.1. Introductory remarks

With the variety of stillbirth definitions, there is currently no searchable entity to identify epidemiologic literature on stillbirths according to the WHO definitions in medical databases. It has become increasingly complex to identify literature on stillbirths by any definition. “Foetal death” was until recently the Medical Subject Heading (MeSH) term under which both stillbirths and other foetal deaths were indexed. Stillbirth became the preferred term in 2006, while the MeSH term “foetal death” has been kept for other foetal deaths. The current stillbirth MeSH indexing is not associated with any birth weight or gestational age definition, and the MeSH term “stillbirth” does not systematically capture all publications on stillbirths if the authors have used other terms such as “late foetal death,” “intrapartum foetal death,” or simply “foetal death,” while the remaining MeSH term “foetal death” excludes some indexed as stillbirths (Facchinetti, Dekker, Baronciani, Saade, 2010: 213).

Stillbirth, therefore, is defined as “Foetal death prior to the complete expulsion or extraction from its mother of a product of conception, irrespective of the duration of pregnancy; the death is indicated by the fact that after such separation the foetus does not breathe or show any other evidence of life, such as beating of the heart, pulsation of the umbilical cord, or definite movement of voluntary muscles” (Facchinetti, Dekker, Baronciani, Saade, 2010: 112). Beyond definitions, the greatest problem in studying the global epidemiology of stillbirths is simply that the vast majority of stillbirths are never counted or registered in any way. More than half of births worldwide occur in countries that have no official record on stillbirths from vital registrations or estimates from Demographic and Health Surveys (DHS). The counting of stillbirths presents unique challenges and opportunities. As many as 50 million live births worldwide are not registered anywhere. Efforts to provide greater coverage have emphasised that the incentives for the individual to be counted in civil

registration systems are linked to the perceived benefits from the legal status that registration provides. In stillbirths, such incentives are not obvious in communities to whom society have offered little advances in health care or social benefits (Facchinetti, Dekker, Baronciani, Saade, 2010: 177).

Stillbirths constitute over half the global perinatal mortality, but only a few are registered in any health information system. (1) According to the World Health Organisation (WHO) estimates, 3 million stillbirths occurred in 2004 (2), apparently down from 3.3 million in 2000 (1) and 4.3 million in 1995. (3) There is little reason to believe that this trend reflects a decade of success in stillbirth prevention, and the authors of the WHO estimates acknowledge that the latest figures by all accounts are a significant underestimation (Facchinetti, Dekker, Baronciani, Saade, 2010: 66 of 270).

> "One of the difficulties in the study of stillbirths is that they are universally undercounted especially at lower ages of gestation. What constitutes a "stillbirth" varies considerably between countries, and while a universal definition has been desired, it is unlikely that a globally accepted definition will be agreed upon. The lower gestational age limit that divides a "miscarriage" from a "stillbirth" depends if a country has resources to collect information and if the intention of the data collection is to count the deaths that could possibly have "survived." In the United Kingdom, reporting of deaths begins at 24 weeks (presumably because the mortality of those born prior to 24 is so high); in most developing countries there is very little data about losses prior to 28 weeks of gestation. The term foetal death, foetal demise, stillbirth, and stillborn all refer to the delivery of a foetus showing no signs of life" (Spong 2011: 266-267 of 998).

> "A stillbirth, the birth of a deceased infant, may seem as an intuitively straightforward concept with little room for subjective interpretations. Yet, there are multiple definitions in use, which will provide significantly different epidemiology of frequencies and causes." (Facchinetti, Dekker, Baronciani, Saade, 2010: 95 of 270)

Research published in the *Indian Journal of Obstetrics and Gynaecology Research*, on the psychological impact of stillbirth on the *accoucheur*, defines stillbirth as the birth of a baby without any signs of life after 28 weeks of pregnancy (Sharma, Dheer, Chaudhary, 2019: 431-434). The incidence of stillbirths in developed countries is only 2% of the total 2.6 billion worldwide. A vast majority 98% are from developing and underdeveloped nations. Whereas, "the World Health Organisation (WHO) defines stillbirth as a "foetal death late in pregnancy" and allows each country to define the gestational age at which a foetal death is considered a stillbirth for reporting purposes" (WHO Press 2001). "A moderate proportion of countries have extrapolated from the WHO's definition of what constitutes the "perinatal period" to define stillbirth (≥500 g, or if the weight is not known, with a gestational age greater than 22 completed weeks (154 days). But even among developed countries the gestational age at which foetal losses are reported ranges from 16 weeks (The Netherlands) to 28 weeks (Sweden). Other factors that influence the reported stillbirth rate are the accuracy of gestational age dating; whether obstetric providers are accurately educated on the definition of a "liveborn" or "stillborn"; if terminations of pregnancy for lethal or sublethal anomalies are specifically excluded; and if the inevitable previable spontaneous losses that result in a stillborn had labour augmented are included. A stillbirth occurs more often than deaths due to AIDS and viral hepatitis combined; stillbirth is 10 times more common than sudden infant death syndrome, nearly 5 times more common than infant deaths related to congenital anomalies, and 5 times more often than postnatal deaths due to prematurity" (Kung, Hoyert, Xu, Murphy 2008: Number 10).

There are many downstream consequences of stillbirth, the most significant and long-lasting being experienced by mothers. Women who experience stillbirth are at an increased risk of multiple maladies including depression, anxiety and posttraumatic stress disorder, somatisation disorder, and family disorganisation. Many people still consider stillbirths as "God's Will" and that death before birth counts less than those after, but for many parents, a stillbirth represents a loss of chance and a family member.

According to WHO, in 2014, "the World Health Assembly endorsed the Every Newborn Action Plan (ENAP) which includes a global target of 12 or fewer stillbirths per 1000 total births in every country by 2030. By 2019, 128 mainly high-income and upper-middle-income countries had met this target, but many countries have not. Around 84 per cent of all stillbirths occur in low- and lower-middle-income countries, however, high rates of stillbirths can also be observed in high-income countries within vulnerable groups and ethnic minorities." (https://www.who.int/health-topics/stillbirth#tab=tab_1).

As ministers and or pastors, we are called to respond with compassion and support. It is in our nature and calling of our vocation that, we respond with theological integrity. How then do we respond to a parental request that their stillborn be baptised before they are buried? It is in situations like these where one needs to balance between pastoral ministry and theological integrity. This will be dealt with in the following chapters.

The report published by Times Live, 8th October 2020, by Sipokazi Fokazi, from UN and World Health Organisation on stillbirths, "states that nearly 2million babies around the world are stillborn, with 5,400 stillbirths recorded daily. The report, titled *A Neglected Tragedy: The Global Burden of Stillbirths,* reports that three out of four stillbirths occur in Africa. With many countries health systems under pressure due to the Covid-19 pandemic, the report warns that the number of stillbirths could shoot up even more. It has

been estimated that with a reduction of about 50% in health services as a result of Covid-19, nearly 200,000 additional stillbirths over a 12-month period could be recorded in low and middle income countries. While SA has fared much better than its African counterparts such as Nigeria, Ethiopia and Somalia, which recorded about 25 stillbirths per 1,000, it is the worst performing country compared to its Brics counterparts. In 2019, SA had 16.4 stillbirths for every 1,000 births. This is more than double the number of stillbirths in Brazil, which had 7.5 per 1,000 births. China had 7.5 stillbirths while Russia only had 3.8 stillbirths for every 1,000 babies born in that country. Other African countries with weaker economies also recorded fewer stillbirths compared to SA. Botswana recorded 15.2, Zimbabwe had 16 and Zambia had 14.8 stillbirths for every 1,000 births." (https://www.timeslive.co.za/news/south-africa/2020-10-08-covid-19-to-worsen-stillbirth-epidemic-while-sas-record-is-poorest-of-brics-countries/).

6.2. Basic pastoral question

This pastoral question can be formulated by reference to the dialogue of Jesus with the Samaritan woman at Jacob's well. "She wants to know whether one must continue to "worship on this mountain" (Mount Gerizim, the high place of Samaritan worship) or "in Jerusalem" (the centre of Jewish worship). Jesus answers, "Woman, believe me, the hour is coming when you will worship the Father neither on this mountain nor in Jerusalem…. God is Spirit, and those who worship him must worship in spirit and truth" (John 4:20-21, 24). Of course, according to the theological vocabulary of John's Gospel, "to worship in spirit and truth" does not mean praying in a wholly interior or purely mental way, but worshipping according to the Holy Spirit that Jesus will give after his resurrection and that leads to the true knowledge of the Father. Nevertheless, even though Jesus does not specify here the concrete forms which the true worship of God must take, he is clear about the spirit in which it must be conducted. Then why not ask: In order to

worship the Father what need do we have of all these rites which unfold in a more or less obligatory fashion and make use of antiquated gestures and movements, of pre-programmed formulas, of materials imposed in the name of “tradition,” without speaking of the ostentatious and solemn ceremonies with which the Church surrounds them?” (Chauvet 2001: 172 of 621). The question underlying this dream expresses an intuition that deserves to be considered: that the Church can never be in serene possession of its liturgical rites, that it must constantly resist the temptation to imprison itself—as well as God—within them. For these rites, which have Christian meaning only if they are filled with the Word and in-dwelt by the Spirit, contest the Word of God in the very moment they attest it. In this sense, the temptation to do away with them can be salutary.

6.3. Basic theological question

“What do we learn about Christian faith and Christian identity from the fact that the sacraments have always been their very fabric? Chauvet asserts that the response is based from its very origins, the Church has always celebrated the sacraments, in particular, baptism and the Eucharist; and ever since then no one becomes a Christian except by receiving these sacraments. We do not seek to justify this fact, that is to say, to explain it as necessary; the best we could do, as the medieval theologians did, would be to supply arguments that would show the “fittingness” of the sacraments within the reality of the incarnation. In other words, we do not try to answer the question why in relation to the sacraments because we take into account the fact that they were born with the Church, that they are always-already contemporary with it and every Christian” (Chauvet 2001: 192 of 621). “The question it sought to answer was: What does it mean for the faith that things are so? Then the answer was; “the fact that Christian identity cannot be separated from the sacraments (in particular those of initiation) means that faith cannot be lived in any other way, including what is most spiritual in it,

than in the mediation of the body, the body of a society, of a desire, of a tradition, of a history, of an institution, and so on. What is most spiritual always takes place in the most corporeal. This being the case, it is possible to perceive the concern of this (fundamental) theology of sacramentality: nothing less than a Christian reconciliation with the body (or better, as shall be made clear, with corporeity)" (Chauvet 2001: 192 of 621).

6.4. Prevalence of baptism of stillborn within African culture and the Methodist Church.

There are no recorded cases of the prevalence of stillborn baptism in Africa that I know of. The only proof we have is the Pastoral and Liturgical Guidelines for Clergy in the Anglican, Lutheran, Methodist Church outside South Africa as well as those from the Isalm faith. There is no interest so far in treating this issue as an area of concern and study. The Methodist Church, however, has only records of deaths reported and recorded in the death register. Stillbirth baptisms are normally handled as pastoral interventions done by ministers at the request of parents during the funeral service before burial or cremation. This sacrament has no value or anything important to the stillborn. Ministers are mainly focused on giving pastoral care to grieving parents.

About stillborn baptism within the African culture, most traditional families will perform their cultural rites concerning the child. The stillborn will be announced to the ancestors in preparation for the stillborn to be received by the living dead. If the parents are staunch Christians, the Church or minister would normally get a request for stillbirth baptism as they believe that their child would not be found acceptable by both their ancestors and God in the world of the spirit.

6.5. Psychological Effects of Stillbirth

"Stillbirth is one of the traumatic experiences that may incite long-term psychopathology which meets the criteria for anxiety, depression, and posttraumatic stress disorder (PTSD). While it is given that, no pastoral or any amount of compassionate care can bring a child back to their family, interactions with medical staff during the acute crisis as well as postvention services, such as psychotherapy and ritualisation, may significantly influence the degree, range, and intensity of their emotional anxiety and long-term psychological outcomes. Those individual effects then ripple outward, affecting those around and even the community. It is the responsibility of providers such as religious leaders, social workers and community leaders to be knowledgeable, wise, and compassionate. Professionals need to understand that stillbirth, for most women, represents a traumatic and abiding loss on many levels, including biological, psychological, emotional, cognitive, social and spiritual… At some point in history, stillbirth became the unspeakable. Many misinformation about stillbirth in society has led to false assumptions about the nature of this tragedy. Despite the fact that many babies are stillborn beyond viability, their deaths are often nosologically identified as a pregnancy or reproductive loss. Many academic journal articles and books discuss stillbirth in the context of miscarriage or abortion, failing to recognise its uniqueness in terms of emotional attachment, physiology, economics, and social factors … It was sad that for the longest time in history, stillbirth was not treated as a unique tragedy which needed the outmost attention it deserved. In recent times, the public attention is turning toward this very tragic loss for women and their partners. Though, much of the attention, at least until very recently, has been focused on the controversy instead of issues related to support, appropriate psychosocial care, or research… Social and political factors such as the degree of perceived

> social support and validation are important factors influencing normal and protracted grief reactions. Disenfranchised grief is here described as that which "persons experience when they incur a loss that is not or cannot be openly acknowledged, publicly mourned, or socially supported." This may hinder the grief process, increasing feelings of isolation and despair. Stillbirth is considered a socially stigmatised loss, similar to suicide, or the death of a disabled child, and thus, grieving mothers often feel disenfranchised, making them more vulnerable to painful, existential emotions that may jeopardise mental and emotional health. This marginalisation, as well as death anxiety on the part of providers and individuals, may also affect the ways in which others, at the mezzo level, interact with grieving families following stillbirth. Providers need to truly understand the connection between those influences and the psychological experiences of stillbirth on a grieving family (Spong 2011: 204-206).

In the case of stillbirth, the bereavement of the mother is unique in that, she is grieving the loss of a part of the self. She has lost, in a very tangible sense, material immortality.

The commonly held rejection of stillbirth as the death of a child arouses a discrepancy in the mother's reality and may delegitimise grief responses after the death of a stillborn child. Providers, family members, and friends often mourn the death of a stillborn baby differently, since the baby was intangible to them; whereas, if an older child died, an entire community, friends, neighbours, would likely share in the mourning. Mothers experience "social pressure to forget with the fact that the person being remembered was known to so few".

Even refusal by religious leaders or pastors to baptise is seen as an intentional devaluing of the baby's worth. At this point, pastors are required

to be pastoral in their approach to the situation instead of being academic. Our duty as pastors is to the bereaved mother and the entire family and not a moment of exercising theological knowledge on the sacraments (Spong 2011: 206). This may bring a sense of aloneness after stillbirth, intensifying and complicating grief and sometimes causing protracted grief and social withdrawal.

> "Social reactions perceived as abandoning by providers, family members, or even partners usually result in tremendous stress on the woman, her family, and even the marital dyad as women suffer losses related to their sense of self. Few human experiences are as unnatural as giving birth to a dead baby, a death out of order, and survivor guilt is not uncommon. The mother, often plagued with self-doubt, wonders about her role in the baby's death. She may also wonder about her worthiness as a mother to her surviving or subsequent children. Because women often experience their unborn babies as an integral extension of the self, to "abandon" the baby is to abandon the mother. To deny the baby's worth is to also refute the woman's worth. That implicit denial of her worthiness does not come without significant risk. Many women feel like failures, and sometimes, even killers." (Spong 2011: 206)

6.6. Individual and familial challenges

Many families are confronted with huge challenges when a child dies. This is due to:

- The unnaturalness of the death,
- Parents' failure as protectors,
- The need for reorganisation of the family,
- The need to adjust roles, and

- Communication

During the serious crisis, they face difficult decisions about ritualising the baby, autopsies, and final disposition plans. Furthermore, they confront the unfamiliar territory of grief, while often caring for surviving children, restructuring roles, and adjusting back into life. At the individual level, parents and siblings are left to cope “with their own emotional anxiety” as each member of the family struggles for equipoise and leaving little energy to devote to the emotional nurturance of others (Spong 2011: 207).

It was found that stillbirth crosses generations and that “women can absorb during childhood the impact” of their mother’s loss - the death of a sibling. Thus, they are “particularly vulnerable to fear during their pregnancy”. Some women report ongoing, intense emotions, such as anxiety, and this influenced their actual and perceived interactions with their children.

> “It is clear that, women experiencing stillbirth face consanguineous factors associated with the loss, sometimes alone and often awakening substantial existential anxiety. For instance, there are few tangible things to remind her of the baby, and she may desperately cling to anything that recognises and validates her sense of motherhood. Cognitive functioning may be compromised following a traumatic experience, and her hormones are adjusting to a postpartum world in which no baby exists for her to nurture. While somatisation is common after any traumatic loss, the fact that the baby died within her body adds a layer of complication: Death came into her body and took away her baby. Nothing feels so untimely or unjust. She survived, but her baby did not. Her breasts continue to produce milk for the dead baby. Her womb, the once-safe refuge that housed her child, sags but there is no baby to nurse at her breast. Her body yearns for her baby and her arms ache: and there is a powerful, evolutionary impetus

behind this drive. The emotional state derived from maternal hormones is incongruent with her reality for she cannot physically bond with her now dead baby." (Spong 2011: 208)

This emotional instability can have strong biological factors, even though the process appears psychological or social.

6.7. Dealing with the after-effect of stillbirth

Kolski, Berghuis and Myer (2012: 120) suggest the following to assist the grieving parent or the partner and have ten vital things to consider:

- Receive appropriate medical care. It is advisable that as pastors, or caregivers, we encourage our members to follow medical assistance as prescribed to them and also to undergo a medical check-up.
- It is encouraged to allow the grieving mother to actively participate in the discussions regarding the disposition of the stillborn, create an opportunity for the mother to see and hold the stillborn before any arrangement of a memorial, cremation or burial is done. This will allow the mother to start the process of letting go and begin with the grieving process. We need to educate and prepare the client for what to expect; process the client's emotions; provide supportive and encouraging feedback regarding active involvement in decision-making.
- Allow the mother to describe the feelings that were experienced at the time of receiving stillborn and how it has negatively impacted their lives. This will allow the mother to open up and be able to share their emotions, loss and frustrations and disappointment.
- Complete screening tools to identify the severity of grief reactions. This will assist in referring the mother should any medical intervention be required.

- Assist grieving parents to verbalise an understanding of their distorted cognitive messages regarding the cause of death that promote anger or hopelessness and its treatment.
- Grieving steps leading to healing must be explained to the mother to reassure her that grief is personal and that everyone differs in the way they process grief.
- Assist the grieving mother to verbalise any unresolved grief issues that may be contributing to guilt, depression, helplessness, or anger. Assist the mother in identifying and expressing feelings connected with the loss.
- Assist in helping to move from self-blame to understanding that, some things are just not in our control. This could be done by assisting the client in developing coping strategies for her loss.
- Create a support base for the family and inquire about the client's religious/ spiritual beliefs and encourage them to use this resource for support; reinforce the client's use of faith as a source of comfort and healing.
- Help the mother to verbalise hopeful and positive statements regarding the future. This will assist in identifying grief as a process; reminding them that there will be various intensities of emotions over time, and at times unexpectedly; validate the normalcy in a variation of feelings. Furthermore, to develop a plan for coping with those emotions such as open communication with support systems and devotion to spiritual discipline and prayer.

6.8. Legislation

"In South Africa, a foetus is not vested with any constitutional rights and is primarily viewed as being part of the body of a pregnant woman" (Pickles 2014: 20-41). This position is accepted by the authors. However, the authors assert that legislative provisions relating to the management of foetus and infant

remains should be clear and consistent, providing appropriate guidance for all reasonably foreseeable outcomes. Legislative provisions should specifically also cater for the subjective need for respectful and sensitive management of all forms of human remains, including those of foetuses and abandoned infants. It is not possible to accommodate this stance in practice because of the approach currently adopted by the law.

6.9. Pastoral considerations

Introduction

> With more than two million babies being stillborn worldwide each year, it comes to about one in 160 pregnancies. We all know that, death is a tragedy, even worse if it's of a baby. Most of the time the baby dies before labour begins, but sometimes the baby dies during labour (about 15 per cent). These numbers represent many millions of people across the world who have been affected by stillbirth and whose grieving hearts are crying out for expression and support …The death of a baby before that time is technically considered a miscarriage. But we know that, no matter how many weeks or months pregnant someone was, when you lose your baby through death, you grieve and you need to mourn. It is said that the heart knows no magic number and often begins bonding very early in pregnancy (Wolfelt 2012: 162).

> "The death of a child, especially a stillbirth, is the most profound, stressful event an adult may experience" (Bonanno 2001; Fish 1986; Wing 2001). In dealing with bereaved families, one has discovered that many of us are hard on ourselves when we are in mourning. We have inappropriate expectations of how "well" we should be doing with our grief. "These expectations result from common societal messages that tell us to be strong in the face of grief. We are told to "carry on," to "keep your chin up," and to "keep busy." In actuality, when we are in grief we need to slow down, turn inward, embrace

our feelings of loss, as well as seek and accept support. It's a challenge to be self-compassionate in our mourning-avoiding culture" (Wolfelt 2012: 162).

"For decades, mothers (and fathers) were separated from their stillborn or dying babies in the belief that grief could be prevented if no attachments were formed. After it was established that attachment relationships between mother and child are already formed during pregnancy" (Giles 1970; Kennel 1970). "It has only been in recent years that a family's grief over a stillborn baby has been acknowledged as a significant loss by our society. Even today, many people do not know what to say or do to provide support and comfort. In addition, there are no cultural norms for mourning the loss of someone who has never lived outside the womb and was never formally welcomed into your larger community of family and friends" (Wolfelt 2012: 171).

However, "normal parental grief reactions immediately following stillbirth have been well documented and resemble those in other bereavement situations. Profound sadness, depressed mood, irritability, preoccupation, anxiety, changes in eating and in sleeping patterns are all considered to be part of a normal grief response" (Burnett 1997; Parkes 1972; Raphael 1984).

Caroline S E Homer, in her article, "*Supporting Women, Families, and Care Providers after Stillbirth*", asserts that, "each stillbirth is accompanied by great sadness and often distress, not only for the woman, father, and families" (see http://dx.doi.org/10.1016/S0140-6736(15)01278-7), but also for the health professionals, especially midwives, who attend them. Midwives are particularly affected because they are usually the ones who attend the births and provide social and emotional support to the family, before and after the birth. The '*Lancet Series on Ending Preventable*

Stillbirths' highlights both the actions that can reduce the risk of intrapartum stillbirths, including skilled attendance at birth and facility delivery, and also the importance of bereavement care.

The other types of care needed among those dealing with grief and loss is venturing into "bereavement counselling", care and support for parents as well as for healthcare providers are important in all contexts and countries. When such support is missing due to scarce resources, the burden of loss is even greater for the women and families, as well as for the midwives, doctors, and nurses who attend them. The Methodist Church must give attention to the care of both families and the health professionals to ensure that the burden of grief after a stillbirth does not affect the capacity to provide quality care to women and newborn babies.

In a paper presented to the Faculty of Loyola Marymount University in May 2021 on '*Pastoral Care to the Grievers in Crisis*', Andrew Cho says:

> The grief in the bereaved has challenged the pastoral care to the grievers in the parish in numerous ways with regard to how to deal with them. It has called for many theological questions about the pastoral care to the grievers at the Church which is assigned to be the custodian of healing through faith. Thus the ministry of pastoral care to the grievers must look and evaluate the effectiveness of the pastoral care to the grievers which can be done through diverse cares to grieving that the Church has to handle. In this context, this paper will redefine the role of the pastoral minister and its ministry to the grievers in the pandemic crisis.

He further asserts that "The rituals of honouring and saying goodbye to the dead (even to stillborn) runs deep. Many Church members traditionally reach out and provide a comforting touch to grieving family or friends in sympathy and condolences instinctively.

Practical suggestions

> "Pastoral care and Spirituality play a vital role in exiting and managing existential anxiety as grieving families struggle to find meaning in their loss. Traumatic experiences may ignite an existential crisis from which concerns related to spirituality include finding meaning or purposelessness, disconnectedness or connectedness, misunderstanding or coherence, and the struggle toward transcendence arises. Transcendence addresses that which goes beyond the mundane of the material world. It entails finding hope amidst the hopelessness of grief. For the religious, it may entail an enriched relationship with the Creator, for the spiritual, the connection to the Universe … Finding meaning, despite a person's individual spiritual orientation, may help a mourner reframe, integrate, and make sense of the loss." (Spong 2011: 208)

This is a core process, as stillbirth often affects a mother's sense of justness, as she ponders: "Why me?" Spiritual affiliation may provide an essential place for deepened relationships with others. The Methodist Church does not have any resource material that assists parents who gave birth to a stillborn.

Viktor Frankl, in his seminal book *Man's Search for Meaning*, notes that soul-searching, meditation, or prayer may play a role in providing an altered state of consciousness that is necessary for some to discover pathways to heal. Frankl discusses the concept of tragic optimism, that is, the good that can come from tragic experiences by:

- Turning despair into human achievement and accomplishment;
- Deriving from suffering and guilt the motivation to change for the better; and

- Discovering the incentive to take responsible action.

However, he goes on to note that this optimism cannot be born of coercion. “It cannot be controlled from the periphery, and it cannot be commanded from within the self. Rather, through the gradual actualisation of potential meaning inherent in any tragedy, a person may eventually realise tragic optimism (see Spong 2011: 208).

In the Anglican ‘*Pastoral and Liturgical Guidelines for Clergy’*, several practical things are proposed, that the Church can do in the event of an unanticipated stillbirth as parents have no time to prepare and experience sudden acute bereavement. The clergy, chaplains or lay pastoral workers’ liturgical involvement needs to be as sensitive and competent as their pastoral response.

The Church maintains that practical arrangements for these services should take into account that a grieving mother may have recently given birth and may be physically uncomfortable. Consideration should be given to the provision of comfortable seating, the temperature of venues and the duration of services. Siblings should be included in these services both at the planning stage and during them. Children can be encouraged to create tokens of remembrance such as a written or spoken prayer, art, letters, symbols etc. which can then be appropriately presented and/or woven into the prayers. Parents and their baby who has died should be included in services of remembrance in the Church with the permission of the parents. This will also assist in bringing closure to those mourning families and parents.

Some parents might appreciate the service of prayer and naming. When parents give their baby a name, the Church’s provision of a naming ceremony is an important pastoral response. The blessing can be used on

its own or in conjunction with the naming service. This can also be a time to prepare for the funeral of a baby and to explore personal choices.

It is known that compassionate leaders are better prepared for the crisis thanks to their ability to help followers get over the external threat with a different dimensional perspective. In his letter (Romans 8:38) to faithful Christians in Rome, St. Paul reassures the suffering people with a different viewpoint. He argues that neither death, nor life, nor powers, nor principalities, nor things present, nor things to come, nor height, nor depth can separate people from the love of God in Christ Jesus, whose hands and feet are made up by his people on earth called the Church.

6.10. Possible liturgies[1]

The following are possible guidelines intended to assist ministers in dealing with grieving parents and families, especially where there are requests to have some form of rite or service. The material and formulary presented here were reworked from existing formularies used in other Churches.

INTRODUCTION

The service of prayer and naming and the funeral service in cases of Miscarriage, Stillbirth and Neonatal death

[1] Reworked from 'Pastoral and Liturgical Guidelines for Clergy & Deacons,' (Anglican and Free Methodist Church in Canada Liturgies).

Preamble

A funeral has its unique challenges, but a service for a stillborn child, or a service in the event of a miscarriage or neonatal death, is complicated by the fact that one cannot offer tributes that celebrate accomplishments or recall the personality of the life being remembered.

The Methodist Church of Southern Africa is aware of the huge need for pastoral and bereavement care for the parents and families of children who died being a stillbirth, miscarriage or neonatal death. The sudden wrenching loss and dark finality of death once again remind us of how vulnerable we are. We acknowledge the fact that the parents and their families are grieving the loss of a human life that is experienced at a very deep level - especially when one of these tiny innocents dies, the world can seem to be a gruesome and chaotic place for all of us.

The Church must provide services and prayers as an important part of her pastoral care. It is important that the Church assist grieving families in the blessing and naming of a stillborn, or who has died in utero or during or shortly after birth. The clergy and/or lay pastoral workers' liturgical involvement needs to be as sensitive and competent as their pastoral response.

The provision of a special funeral service should also be designed to meet the particular pastoral needs of parents, to acknowledge their grief, pain and confusion, and to assure them of Jesus' unfailing love for all, especially the children. The Bible teaches us that, Jesus said, "*Let the little children come to me, and do not hinder them, for the kingdom of God belongs to such as these*." (Matthew 19:14).

The following considerations should be attended to in handling the situation. The service offered here is only a suggested outline and should be adapted as necessary.

- Prayers in the service need to address any sense of guilt that may be experienced by both the father and mother.
- Practical arrangements for a funeral or memorial services should take into account that a grieving mother may have recently given birth and may be physically uncomfortable.
- All arrangements should be done in consultation with the grieving family.
- The Church should assist parents in the naming of the stillborn as this will help bring closure faster as the child would have a name that they will remember the child with.
- Place for memorial, funeral or cremation to be done in consultation with the parents.
- The Service of Prayer and Naming provided should be used separately but in certain circumstances, it may be appropriate to use it just before the Funeral Service.
- Once preparations for these services have been finalised, the funeral programme should be provided with the baby's, parent/s (and siblings) names on it.

Guidelines

- The use of the baby's name is vital throughout the funeral service.
- The clergy should not avoid the expression of the depth of emotion and pain being felt by all involved.
- The Funeral Service should at the same time honour the life of the baby, the pain of loss, the loss of hopes and dreams and the hope of the baby now being in God's love/care.

- Some passages of Scripture are provided and any alternative choices should be chosen sensitively. Readings that communicate any sense of guilt, shame or blame must be avoided.
- Many people experience a sense of awkwardness in talking with others dealing with grief. Two common responses to a miscarriage or stillbirth, often said by well-meaning people with the best of intentions, can be unhelpful and even hurtful for a couple that are grieving. These comments are:
    - "**It wouldn't have been a healthy child**." - grieving parents need love and support, not explanations.
    - "**You can always have another baby!"** - While that may be the hope, this comment is insensitive because the parents that grieve do not want some other child. There could never be a replacement for the child that was lost. The time may come for a couple to consider trying to have another child but that is not a possibility they are willing to entertain in the early stages of grief.

Possible Scripture readings

- Matthew 18:1-5, 10-14
- Matthew 11:25-30
- Mark 10:13-16
- Romans 8:18, 28, 31-32, 35, 37-39
- Romans 6:3-9
- Romans 8: 14-23
- Wisdom of Solomon 3:1-9
- Wisdom of Solomon 4:7-15
- Isaiah 65:17-21
- Jeremiah 31:15-17

- Jeremiah 1:4-8
- Song of Solomon 2:10-13
- 2 Samuel 12:16-23
- Lamentations 3:17-26

SERVICE OF PRAYER AND NAMING

Gathering:

The minister may greet the family.

Music for worship may be offered while the people gather.

The coffin may be carried into the place of worship in procession

Opening Hymn

Ministers say:

God of compassion, we are gathered here with *... (and ...)*,
to honour this baby not able to be brought to the fullness of life we hoped and intended for *him/her*.
We seek the comfort and knowledge of your love
as given to us in Holy Scripture,
in the gift of your child Jesus who dwelt and died among us, and in your presence with us, as we bless [and name] *him/her*, and commend *him/her* to your care.

The Lord's Prayer:

Our Father, who art in heaven,
hallowed be thy name;
thy kingdom come;

thy will be done;
on earth as it is in heaven.
Give us this day our daily bread.
And forgive us our trespasses,
as we forgive those who trespass against us.
And lead us not into temptation;
but deliver us from evil.
For thine is the kingdom,
the power and the glory,
for ever and ever.
Amen.

Sermon:

Names are an incredibly important part of our identity. They carry deep personal, cultural, familial, and historical connections. They also give us a sense of who we are, the communities in which we belong, and our place in the world. This is why mispronunciations, misuse of our preferred/ common names, or misgendering can negatively affect and possibly hurt and impact a sense of belonging.

John the Baptist was circumcised, as were Jesus and Paul (Lk 1:59; 2:21; Phil 3:5). They all received their names on the eighth day as was the tradition. Through the sacrament of baptism, Christians are received into the Church of God and receive a new ‘clan’ name – that of ‘Christian’ and it seemed to relate with the Sotho process. They are separated from other people and religions because they wholly belong to Christ whose mark and ensign they bear. Baptism serves as a testimony that Christ will forever be their gracious God and Saviour and in Christ God will be their Father.

Our Heavenly Father has also given us a name by which we should be called, the name of Jesus Christ. In the early days of the Church of Jesus Christ, during the time of the apostles, the members of the Church were known by the name of Jesus Christ. The earliest mention is in the Book of Acts where they were called Christians (Acts 11:26). The importance of a name can never be underestimated, neither our earthly name nor the name of Jesus Christ.

Our earthly name is important. It defines us and binds families together by a family name. Temple ordinances make those feelings of unity and love permanent. The sacred name of Jesus Christ is important because it binds us to Him. We take His name upon us and follow Him. He, in turn, blesses us with the Holy Spirit.

Let us remind ourselves of your knowledge of this baby in the words of Psalm 139:

"For you created my inmost being; you knit me together in my mother's womb. I praise you because I am fearfully and wonderfully made; your works are wonderful; I know that full well" *(Psalm 139: 12, 14-15)***.**

People were bringing little children to Jesus to have him touch them, but the disciples rebuked them. When Jesus saw this, he was indignant. He said to them, "Let the little children come to me, and do not hinder them, for the kingdom of God belongs to such as these. I tell you the truth, anyone who will not receive the kingdom of God like a little child will never enter it." And he took the children in his arms, put his hands on them and blessed them *(Mark 10:13-16).*

Naming

If the baby is not being named, the service continues with The Prayers.

The minister says

Holy Scripture teaches us that what is called into being, we know and remember through naming. In recognition of the place, this baby holds in our family and our hearts, in honour of the brief time *he/she* was embodied with us.

Minister will address the parents:

_____ and _____, have you chosen a name for your child?

Parents will answer: We name him/her _____

The Minister will respond:

[Name of child], we give you this name and do so in the Name of Father, Son and Holy Spirit. Although your life was brief, you will be remembered as one belonging to the _____ family and as a gift shared with us all.

The minister says

Let us pray.

God of wisdom and all compassion, you make nothing in vain and love all that you have created. In the midst of our many questions and our lack of understanding, we believe that little _____ is in your presence. We pray for the courage and strength to say "goodbye" before we had the opportunity to say "hello." May you, O Lord, care for, love and nurture little _____ forever. Help us to endure and wait for the day when we will be re-united after we too obtain the fullness of your promises in the age to come, through Jesus Christ our Lord.

Parents repeat after the minister

O God, creator of us all,
give us the grace to honour and remember our baby *N....*
Let our love for *him/her* show forth in our lives.
Sustain our trust in your unfailing love
for *him/her* and for all children, born and unborn,
who rest in the sacred mystery of your love.
May we know your comforting presence
as we gather our strength to go forth from this moment into our lives.
This we ask through Jesus Christ our Saviour. **Amen.**

Dismissal

The minister may say

Tender Shepherd of the flock, *...* lies cradled in your love. Soothe the hearts of *his/her* mother *(and father)*, and bring peace to their lives. Strengthen their faith and give hope to their hearts.

We thank you too for the promise that what we see here in this world is not all there is, and for the hope of seeing him/her again because of the death and resurrection of Jesus Christ. Increase our capacity to trust in your grace, even through our loss. Despite the emptiness that we now feel, we know that _____ is safe in your arms of love.

O God, help and comfort the parent(s) of _____ and each one who feels this loss sharply. Thank you for the people who hold and support them in both their pain and joy. Continue to show your grace to this family. And may your peace, courage, hope and light draw us all together in this hour. All this we pray in the name of Jesus, who died, and yet lives forever. Amen.

For use with or by parents

God of hope, we come to you in shock and grief and confusion of heart. We thank you for the love in which ... was conceived. Help us to find peace in the knowledge of your loving mercy to all your children, and give us light to guide us out of our darkness into the assurance of your love. **Amen**.

Blessing

The minister says;

The eternal God is your dwelling place, and underneath are the everlasting arms. May God bless us and keep us.
May God's countenance shine upon us, and grant us peace and love.
Amen.

THE FUNERAL SERVICE LITURGY LEADING TO BURIAL

In the context of actual Stillbirth, Miscarriage, or Neonatal Death

Gathering

The minister may greet the family.

Music for worship may be offered while the people gather.

The coffin may be carried into the place of worship in procession

[Any or all the following Scriptures may be read.]

"I am the resurrection and the life; he who believes in me, though he dies, yet shall he live, and whoever lives and believes in me shall never die" (John 11:25 26).

“For I know that my Redeemer lives, and at last He will stand upon the earth;… then from my flesh I shall see God, whom I shall see for myself, and my eyes shall behold…” (Job 19:25 27).

“For we brought nothing into the world and we cannot take anything out of the world” (I Timothy 6:7).

“The Lord gave, and the Lord has taken away; blessed be the name of the Lord” (Job 1:21).

The minister says

May the peace and consolation of the Lord Jesus Christ be with you.

And also with you.

Opening Hymn

Opening Prayer

[The minister may pray extemporaneously or use the following]

Heavenly Father, little children were embraced by your son, our Lord Jesus Christ into his arms and blessed them. We pray that you grant to us now the assurance that this child [_____] is encircled by your arms of love now. In the midst of our grief and hurt, strengthen by the inspiration of the Holy Spirit our faith and hope in your Son, Jesus Christ our Lord.

We also ask that you surround _____ and _____, their family and friends, with your love and grace. Comfort them in their sorrow and fill them with your peace. Strengthen their faith in you and bless them with confidence and courage to face the future, through Jesus Christ our Lord. Amen

Here, N refers to the name of the child. If there is no name, the alternatives may be used. The minister may mark the sign of the cross on the child. The parents may be given the opportunity if desired, each to share in marking the sign of the cross on their child. During the prayer ('God of compassion ...') it is appropriate for the minister to place a hand upon the child.

God says: Before I formed you in the womb I knew you (Jeremiah 1:5)

Anointing

For N/all, he lived.

For N/all, he died.

For N/all, he rose again.

He has welcomed _____this child into his eternal kingdom.

Therefore, as a mark of that love and grace, we place on him/her the sign of the cross.

Let us pray:

God of compassion, help us to believe that this child, a lamb of your flock, is in your gentle care through the grace of our Lord Jesus Christ. Amen.

Prayer

Our Father in heaven, hallowed be your name, your kingdom come, your will be done, on earth as in heaven. Give us today our daily bread. Forgive us our sins, as we forgive those who sin against us. Save us

from the time of trial and deliver us from evil. For the kingdom, the power, and the glory are yours now and forever. Amen.

Scripture readings

Jeremiah 31: 15-17

Thus says the Lord: A voice is heard in Ramah, lamentation and bitter weeping. Rachel is weeping for her children; she refuses to be comforted for her children, because they are no more. Thus says the Lord: Keep your voice from weeping, and your eyes from tears; for there is a reward for your work, says the Lord: they shall come back from the land of the enemy; there is hope for your future, says the Lord: your children shall come back to their own country.

Mark 10: 13-16

People were bringing little children to Jesus in order that he might touch them; and the disciples spoke sternly to them. But when Jesus saw this, he was indignant and said to them, 'Let the little children come to me; do not stop them; for it is to such as these that the kingdom of God belongs. Truly I tell you, whoever does not receive the kingdom of God as a little child will never enter it.' And he took them up in his arms, laid his hands on them, and blessed them.

Sermon

Symbolic acts, and/or reflection from parents/family/friends

Prayers

O God, we offer our thanks for ..., for the potential of *his/her* life which came to us as a precious gift from you, even though that potential was

not realised as we would have wished. Although we come with sorrow and with tears, we trust in your unfailing love.
Lord, in your mercy.
Hear our prayer.

At the cemetery

Blessing over the grave

Heavenly Father, bless now this new home of your servant……. We are asking that you allow her/him to rest until that time where all the faithful will rise in the New Jerusalem. We pray this in the wonderful name of our Lord and saviour Jesus Christ.

The Apostles Creed is sung/recited

I believe in God the Father Almighty, Maker of heaven and earth.

And in Jesus Christ, His only Son, our Lord;

Who was conceived by the Holy Spirit; Born of the Virgin Mary;

Suffered under Pontius Pilate; Was crucified, dead and buried;

He descended into Hell; The third day He rose again from the dead;

He ascended into heaven; And sitteth on the right hand of God the Father Almighty; From thence He shall come to judge the living and the dead.

I believe in the Holy Spirit; The Holy Christian Church, the Communion of Saints; The Forgiveness of sins; The Resurrection of the body; And the life everlasting. Amen.

Standing at the head of the coffin and facing it (preferably casting earth upon it as it is lowered into the grave) the minister says:

Almighty God, into your hands we commend your *son/daughter Name*, in sure and certain hope of resurrection to eternal life through Jesus Christ our Lord. **Amen.**

This body we commit to the ground, earth to earth, ashes to ashes, dust to dust. Blessed are the dead who die in the Lord. Yes, says the Spirit, they will rest from their labour for their deeds follow them.

One or more of the following or other prayers is offered:

Gracious God, we thank you for those we love but see no more. Receive into your arms your servant *Name*, and grant that increasing in knowledge and love of you, *he/she* may go from strength to strength in service to your heavenly kingdom; through Jesus Christ our Lord. **Amen.**

Almighty God, look with pity upon the sorrow of your servants, for whom we pray.
Amidst things they cannot understand, help them to trust in your care. Bless them and keep them. Make your face to shine upon them, and give them peace. **Amen**.

O Lord, support us all the day long of our troubled life, until the shadows lengthen and the evening comes, and the busy world is hushed, and the fever of life is over and our work is done. Then in your mercy grant us a safe lodging, and a holy rest, and peace at the last; through Jesus Christ our Lord. **Amen.**

Eternal God, you have shared with us the life of _____. Before *he/she* was ours, *he/she* is yours. For all that _____ has given

us to make us what we are, for that of *him/her* which lives and grows in each of us, and for *his/her* life that in your love will never end, we give you thanks. As of now, we offer _____back into your arms, comfort us in our loneliness, strengthen us in our weakness, and give us the courage to face the future unafraid. Draw those of us who remain in this life closer to one another, make us faithful to serve one another, and give us to know that peace and joy which is eternal life; through Jesus Christ our Lord. Amen.

Blessing

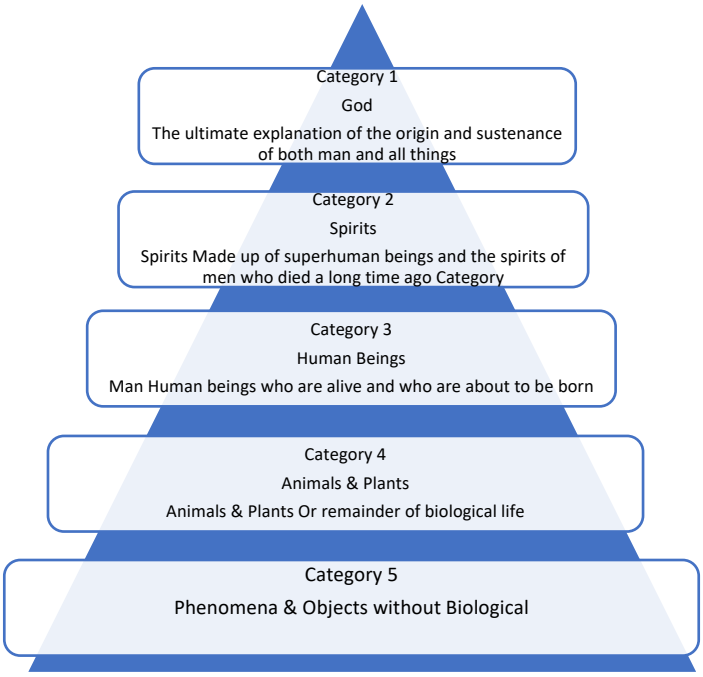
The peace of God, which passes all understanding, keeps your hearts and minds in the knowledge and love of God, and of his Son, Jesus Christ our Lord. And the blessing of God almighty, the Father, the Son and the Holy Spirit, be upon you and remain with you always. Amen.

7. CONCLUSION

7.1. Where do the dead live?

This is one of the questions many of us ask ourselves, what kind of world is it?

> The following diagram shows how B. Idowu, J.S. Mbiti, and G.M. Setiloane capture the divine category and how it relates to other areas of existence with African cosmology. The diagram emphasises the supremacy and divinity of God over everything with ancestors located between humanity and God at the apex of the triangle (Kombo 2007: 163).



For some societies, the departed remain in the neighbourhood of their human homestead. They are still part of the family, as discussed elsewhere. Their surviving relatives and friends feel that the departed are close to them

and that people may even walk on them since their graves are close at hand. Life continues more or less the same in the hereafter as it did in this world. Funeral rites are aimed at marking the separation of the departed from the living, even though it is believed that the dead continue to live in the hereafter. The gate between these two seems to open only one way, and once a person has died they cannot return to human life in their total being. Let us see what happens to their spirit or soul (Mbiti 2015: 122-124).

7.2. The Destiny of the Soul

Even though the spirit leaves the body, "it is thought in many parts of Africa that for a while it lingers on around the body or homestead. For that reason, the right funeral rites must be performed to send it off, to enable it to go away, and to let it join other spirits. While surviving relatives remember the deceased, the spirit more or less leads to a personal continuation of life. It has become what we have called the living dead. People regard it as being much like a human being although it is dead" (Mbiti 2015: 125).

Death is, even for Christians, the ultimate disrupter—radically altering relationships, devastating families, changing the survivors forever, but because of the suffering and death of Jesus, it is not the last word for Christians who live—and die—into the resurrection of Jesus and the promise of eternal life. The suffering, death, and resurrection of Jesus the Christ gives the assurance that God, who became human in every way that we are, has suffered death and understands our pain and trepidation. Death is real and experienced by God, who accompanies the dying with the promise of reconciliation and redemption. Death releases humans into the compassionate care of God.

This "theology of the cross" recognises God's grace in the suffering of Jesus and confirms that even in the tragedy of death, there is the ultimate good news of forgiveness and reconciliation, that death has a word for us, but not the last

word (Bregman 2009: 118). “Death is not a complete destruction of the individual. Life goes on beyond the grave. Therefore, people combine their sorrow over the death of someone with the belief that that is not the end and that the departed continues to live in the hereafter having been afforded the gift of God’s grace” (Mbiti 2015: 119).

Can the following passages be the reasons why people would request stillbirth baptism?

- **1 Corinthians 15:29** - "Now if there is no resurrection, what will those do who are baptised for the dead? If the dead are not raised at all, why are people baptised for them?" NIV.
- **John 3:5 -** “Jesus answered, “Very truly I tell you, no one can enter the kingdom of God unless they are born of water and the Spirit.”
- **Galatians 3:27** - “for all of you who were baptised into Christ have clothed yourselves with Christ.”
- **Mark 16:16 - 16** “Whoever believes and is baptised will be saved, but whoever does not believe will be condemned.”

From the beginning of this thesis, the focus has been on trying to understand the reasons behind requests by grieving parents to baptise their stillborn. Several theological arguments have been explained with clear biblical references to motivate my view against the baptism of the dead. It is clear that what might be bringing the interest is the misplacement of a biblical understanding of what baptism is all about or its theological understanding thereof, second, the understanding of how grace works and how God still interacts with humanity in God’s ongoing “project salvation.”

The Bible is silent about what happens to unbaptised stillborn, and this makes people wonder as to their ultimate place of rest (heaven). However, we can rest knowing that, Jesus welcomed children into a loving and gracious kingdom

of God. The baptism should be enjoyed and experienced as a God-given rite of passage. God does not need to use anything on us that would grant us access to God's presence. The ultimate price (Jn. 3:16) was paid. God became the sacrificial lamb for the salvation of humanity and created order. The promise of God is unfailing and consistent. If a stillborn is not baptised, the promise of being with the father still stands, "And if I go and prepare a place for you, I will come back and take you to be with me that you also may be where I am. You know the way to the place where I am going (Jn. 14:3)." No one will forfeit being clothed with Christ because the grace of God will enable us to enter the kingdom of God and as John Wesley puts it:

- All people need to be saved
- All people can be saved
- All people can know that they are saved and
- All people can be saved to the uttermost

Bible verses like 1 Cor. 15:29 could be blamed for the confusion people find themselves in. It becomes even more complex when black Africans bring to the pot, the place of Christian ancestors to welcome their grandchild or great-grandchild to the world of the living. My understanding is that every Bible verse must be read and understood within the context it was written.

> The background to the text, 1 Cor. 15:29, is that people in the Church of Corinth were worried about their loved ones who died before being baptised. People were practising proxy baptism in trying to save and buy salvation for their deceased. This text alludes to a Corinthian Christian ritual intended to avail salvation in Christ to persons who had died unbaptised. The notion of Christ's proclamation of the Gospel to the deceased in Hades would have been more compatible with this development than ritual incorporation of the dead into the Church.

The ritual, while undoubtedly having funeral overtones, must have had a narrower purpose than the transition of deceased Christians to immediate or eschatological resurrection. We need therefore to return to the question of posthumous initiatory baptism and restrict the funeral rite. We should presumably assume also either that the Church did not have access to the corpse, and hence substituted a living proxy, or that it was believed that once the soul had left the body the latter could no longer receive benefits on behalf of the former. “Two categories of intended beneficiaries were identified, deceased relatives of Corinthian Christians and adherents of the Church who died unbaptised. It is generally accepted that the rite referred to here, was in some sense vicarious” (Barrett 1968: 363; Chow 1992: 144; Dunn 1998: 449; Tuckett 1996: 269; Wedderburn 1987: 287-293). “It was presumably performed on an understanding that the ritual was in and of itself effective in the procurement of salvation for the deceased person on whose behalf it was undergone” (cf. Chow 1992: 144; Hurd 1983: 136).

> It is essential that the ritual practised in Corinth be understood within its cultural context, and not in terms of later western rationalist thinking which, at the least, separates rituals from the spiritual realities they represent. While the description of early Christianity’s understanding of baptism as ‘sacramentalist’ (Bultmann 1952: 135-36; Schweitzer 1931: 185) may be anachronistic and pejorative, it nonetheless recognises that rituals were understood to be real and effective means of harnessing and transmitting divine power for particular purposes. “Irrespective of whether the early Church baptised infants, baptism was essentially a conversion-initiation rite. It represented not a transition in an essentially continuous life cycle, but it represented the fundamental disruption of that cycle through the acquisition of a new and alien identity through incorporation into a new community” (Christiansen 1995, 41). One cannot assume that the rite of Christian initiation could or would have been appropriated and adapted as a funeral

rite. It needs to be observed at this point that early Christian baptism does not belong to the same ritual category as funeral rites.

Nevertheless, “the sense of divine power actually transmitted through the ritual should not be regarded as at all unusual in the early Christian understanding of baptism” (cf. Horsley 1998: 207). “This applies as much to Paul himself as to the Corinthian Christians” (Bornkamm 1971: 189), and so far as rituals undergone on behalf of the dead are concerned, "Paul is at the very least open to believing that the community can act meaningfully on behalf of those who are not able to act on their own behalf” (Hays 1997: 267; cf. Barrett 1968: 363;)

7.3. Can Baptism save stillborn babies?

One does not have to be baptised to go to heaven or be accepted by God. However, we should submit ourselves to baptism if we are able. God commanded that we should be baptised. But our baptism, the visible expression of what God has done for us, that is, God's grace, is not the saving power but it’s rather the divine authentication of God's grace. The sum of the Scriptures teaches us that baptism is not our testimony to God about what we have done for Him, but rather baptism is God's testimony to us concerning His salvation promised, made possible, and applied by God the Father, God the son, and God the Holy Spirit. The Word of God says “we are saved by grace through faith” and that is not of ourselves. We are admonished, “*Believe in the Lord Jesus Christ and you should be saved*” (Acts 16:31). It further commands baptism, but baptism does not save us from sin. Neither Holy Communion nor our faith can save us, only Jesus saves.

It is quite clear from passages such as Acts 15 and Romans 4 that no external act is necessary for salvation as it is by divine grace through faith alone that we are saved (Romans 3:22, 24, 25, 26, 28, 30; 4:5; Galatians

2:16; Ephesians 2:8-9). We are admonished, "*Believe in the Lord Jesus Christ and you should be saved*" (Acts 16:31). The Bible also commands baptism, but baptism does not save us from sin, only Jesus does. Therefore, one does not have to be baptised to go to heaven. However, Christ's followers and their children should submit themselves to baptism if they are able. God commanded that we should be baptised (Matt 28:16-20).

If baptism was essential for salvation, one should expect to find it emphasised whenever the gospel is presented in Scripture. That is not the case, however, Peter mentioned baptism in his sermon on the day of Pentecost (Acts 2:38). In his sermon from Solomon's portico in the Temple (Acts 3:12-26), Peter does not refer to baptism but links forgiveness of sin to repentance (3:19). If baptism is necessary for the forgiveness of sin, why didn't Peter say so in Acts 3?

Ruth Meyers' once said; "The ordinary elements of water, bread, and wine allow us to encounter Christ in ways readily accessible to our senses. We meet Christ not in some abstract spiritual ways, but in these very tangible substances that by their use in worship permeate the very core of our being. An expansive use of these symbols helps us glimpse the infinite, incomprehensible, over flowing love of God in Christ Jesus" (Meyers 1994: 27). This view will assist many of us in understanding that, the precious signs and symbols given to us over time through generations and history, help give us a theological understanding of how God is believed to act with humanity and the Church. Stillborn babies, cannot be baptised, the debt is already paid for them, God's amazing grace has covered everything, we note in Scripture that, "There is some basis for the hope that God has a method, not revealed to us, by which He works faith in the children of Christians dying without Baptism (Mark 10:13-16).

God is not bound by the means to the use of which God has bound us. That is to say that while Christ has commanded us to baptise all nations, God can save sinners without Baptism. He did so throughout the entire Old Testament. During the first 2,000 years, we know of no special means of grace for little children. At the time of Abraham God instituted circumcision, but God did not thereby provide for little girls. It is for God to determine under what conditions God will receive children into God's kingdom.

John Calvin, "in the 1543 *Institutes* and in his published responses to the Council of Trent and Augsburg Interim in the late 1540s, he was critical of the Catholic position on the necessity of baptism for salvation and the related practice of emergency baptism by laypeople. A baby who dies without baptism is not deprived of the grace of regeneration, because God's promise to be the God of the offspring of covenant parents ensures that such children have been adopted by God even before they are born. This "gift of adoption . . . bestows salvation entirely." (in *Calvin's Tracts*, 3:275). If mortally ill babies are baptised, the sacrament is intended only to seal the truth of God's promise, not to render the promise efficacious, since the "promise of itself suffices for its effect."

In other words, "Their salvation has not its commencement in baptism, but being already founded on the word, is sealed by baptism."

This entails that children of believers do not, as the Catholics teach, absolutely need to be baptised to become children of God and engrafted into the Church. They are already part of the body of Christ by the covenant promise, already "set apart from others by a certain special privilege, so that they are regarded as holy in the Church." The sacrament marks their formal reception into the Church.

The most encouraging instance for the Holy Spirit's power to influence even unborn infants spiritually is found in Luke 1:15, 41, 44, where it is stated that

the unborn John the Baptist leapt for joy within his mother's womb when the unborn Jesus was brought into his presence by His mother Mary. Behind all this is the all-encompassing Gospel pronouncement that "God was in Christ, reconciling the world [including the little children] unto Himself" (2 Cor. 5:19).

I want to end by saying; Is stillbirth baptism relevant? Does Scripture support such an act? I must say that, I have used all the tools I can get to go through the Bible in search of any indication of God talking about the baptism of the dead. There is no record whatsoever from the Old Testament into the New Testament that proves to us that, this rite was somehow instituted by God. It is for this reason that stillbirth baptism does not have a theological base where one can argue from.

We all know that the death or loss of a beloved young one or infant before they are born is a difficult experience that one would not wish for any parent. It is therefore upon many of us as pastors, ministers and laity to show great pastoral care, love and support to those individuals who are faced with this situation in their time of mourning or grieving.

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