

Triple Immersion Baptism as a Unifying Sacrament in Early South African Pentecostalism: A Historical-Contextual Study

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Abstract

Triple immersion as an approach to baptism is dipping the baptised person three times in water in the name of the Father, the Son, and the Holy Spirit. This approach is distinguished from single immersion, which involves dipping the baptised person only once in water while simultaneously calling the names of the Father, the Son, and the Holy Spirit. A historical contextualisation of baptism by triple immersion shows that the approach has been a dividing factor in early Pentecostalism, particularly between the Apostolic Faith Mission (AFM) of South Africa and the United Apostolic Faith Church (UAFC). The goal of this article is to demonstrate that baptism by triple immersion should not only be seen in terms of divisions in early Pentecostalism but can also be seen in terms of unifying elements. This is achieved through analysing literature within qualitative research and contextualising the history of triple immersion. The study found that, beyond the dividing elements in the theology and practice of triple immersion, the calling of the name of the Father, the Son, and the Holy Spirit also serves as a unifying factor. Therefore, this study makes an important contribution by highlighting both the dividing and unifying aspects of triple immersion. These unifying aspects are important for the unity of Pentecostalism and the broader ecumenical movement.

Keywords: baptism; triple immersion; Pentecostalism; historical contextualisation; Apostolic Faith Mission of South Africa; United Apostolic Faith Church

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Introduction

Early Pentecostalism refers to the classical Pentecostalism that existed in the first quarter of the 20th century. This period might be considered as the beginning of the Pentecostal movement, particularly in South African Pentecostalism. This is the period that saw the establishment of churches such as the Apostolic Faith Mission (AFM) of South Africa and the United Apostolic Faith Church (UAFC). These classical Pentecostal churches not only practised the baptism in the Holy Spirit but also the baptism in water. The historical contextualisation of the theology and practice of triple immersion demonstrates that this became the dividing factor in early Pentecostalism. The objective of this article is to demonstrate the unifying elements within the baptism by triple immersion. This will be achieved by introducing the theology of triple immersion as an approach to baptism by dipping the baptised person in water three times in the name of the Father, the Son, and the Holy Spirit. The article will conduct a historical contextualisation of triple immersion in early Pentecostalism. The dividing elements in the baptism by triple immersion will be highlighted. In addition, the unifying elements of baptism by triple immersion will be highlighted and point to how the churches mentioned above can become one. The article contributes an understanding of both the dividing and the unifying factors of triple immersion to bring unity to the church in both theology and practice. The unifying factors of baptism by triple immersion have some implications for the unity of Pentecostalism and the broader ecumenical movement in the Christian tradition.

This study contributes to the existing literature by arguing that triple immersion in early South African Pentecostalism should not be read only as a marker of doctrinal conflict, denominational differentiation, or liturgical divergence, as much of the available scholarship tends to emphasise, but also as a sacramental practice that preserved underexplored possibilities for theological convergence and ecclesial unity. The importance of advancing this alternative reading lies in the fact that baptismal controversies have often been narrated primarily through separation, thereby obscuring the shared Trinitarian commitments that continued to exist across divided Pentecostal traditions. By recovering these unifying dimensions, the article offers a more balanced historical-theological account of triple immersion and shows how a practice once associated with fragmentation may also be interpreted as a resource for reconciliation. In this sense, the study has contemporary relevance beyond its historical focus, because present-day Pentecostal and ecumenical conversations still grapple with questions of baptismal recognition, sacramental identity, and the possibility of unity across differences in ritual mode and ecclesial tradition.

Methodology

This article adopts a qualitative historical-theological research design based on a documentary analysis of literature and selected church-related sources on triple immersion baptism in early South African Pentecostalism. The study is situated within a historical-contextual approach, which assumes that theological practices and ecclesial

controversies can only be properly understood when read within their social, ecclesial, political, and racial location. In this regard, historical contextualisation does not treat the past as a neutral sequence of events, but as meaning shaped by context, interpretation, and lived experience (Chalmers 2004, 223–247; Jay 2011, 557–571; Lubinski 2018, 1785–1809). Applied to this study, such an approach makes it possible to locate triple immersion within the concrete conditions of early South African Pentecostalism, where baptismal practice was intertwined with missionary influence, denominational formation, race, and ecclesial identity.

The article also interprets the evidence through an ecumenical sacramental lens. Historical contextualisation makes it possible to examine triple immersion within the social, ecclesial, racial, and theological conditions of early South African Pentecostalism, while ecumenical sacramental theology allows the study to ask how a contested baptismal practice may function not only as a marker of denominational difference but also as a sign of shared Trinitarian faith. This lens is appropriate because baptism, across Christian traditions, is not merely a ritual act but an ecclesial practice bound up with identity, belonging, and questions of mutual recognition (Alexander 2008, 48–69; Studebaker 2011, 201–215; WCC 2011). The wider ecumenical literature likewise treats baptism as closely connected to ecclesiology, Christian initiation, and the bonds of visible unity.

The study was based on the purposive selection of sources. Included materials were those directly relevant to one or more of the following themes: the theology and practice of baptism, the historical development of Pentecostalism in South Africa, denominational differences between the Apostolic Faith Mission (AFM) and the United Apostolic Faith Church (UAFC), and ecumenical interpretations of baptism as a possible basis for Christian unity. The source base therefore comprised peer-reviewed journal articles, scholarly books and chapters, theses and dissertations, and selected denominational or archival materials where these were necessary for historical clarification. Particular attention was given to studies on Pentecostal baptism and sacramental theology (Alexander 2008, 48–69; Jensen 2012, 371–405; Studebaker 2011, 201–215), to South African Pentecostal history (Anderson 2015, 317–330; De Wet 1989; Mofokeng 2021, 75–98; Morton 2017, 1–15), and to recent work revisiting Pentecostal water baptism in constructive theological terms (George 2024).

Sources were excluded where they dealt only marginally with baptism, where they lacked relevance to Pentecostal or South African ecclesial history, or where they did not contribute materially to the theological question under investigation. The aim was not to produce an exhaustive history of all baptismal traditions, but a focused historical-theological reading of triple immersion within a specific Pentecostal setting. This distinction is important, because the present study is not a general literature survey on baptism, but an interpretive analysis of how one disputed baptismal practice functioned within the formation, differentiation, and possible reconciliation of early South African Pentecostal communities.

The material was analysed through thematic document analysis. After the relevant texts were identified, they were read comparatively and coded around recurring themes such as baptismal symbolism, Trinitarian confession, ecclesial differentiation, missionary influence, sacramental theology, race and segregation, and ecumenical recognition. In keeping with the historical-contextual approach, the analysis did not isolate doctrinal claims from their context, but examined how those claims emerged within particular historical and ecclesial circumstances (Chalmers 2004, 223–247; Jay 2011, 557–571; Lubinski 2018, 1785–1809). This was especially important in the South African case, where baptismal practices developed within a racially stratified religious environment and where sacramental difference could become entangled with broader processes of institutional separation and identity formation (De Wet 1989; Mofokeng 2021, 75–98; Morton 2017, 1–15).

The “unifying factors” were identified from the literature by tracing points at which otherwise divergent traditions still shared core theological commitments. These included, among others, the common use of the Trinitarian baptismal formula, a shared understanding of baptism as Christian initiation, overlapping Pentecostal origins, and the wider ecumenical recognition that baptism may express incorporation into the body of Christ even where modes differ (Alexander 2008, 48–69; LaCugna 1989, 235–250; Studebaker 2011, 201–215; WCC 2011). In other words, the study did not deny the divisive role that baptismal mode has played historically; rather, it asked whether the same literature also preserved elements of theological convergence that have been underemphasised in previous scholarship. This is consistent with recent efforts in Pentecostal theology to revisit water baptism not only as denominational practice but also as an ecclesial and embodied act with broader theological significance (George 2024).

A limitation of the study is that some of the available historical material is fragmentary, unevenly preserved, or shaped by denominational interests. Early Pentecostal sources often privilege internal narratives, missionary voices, or later retrospective accounts, which means that some historical reconstructions remain partial. In addition, accessible published scholarship does not always preserve the same depth of detail across the AFM, UAFC, and related traditions. The argument advanced here should therefore be read as a historically grounded and theologically interpretive account based on the best available sources, rather than as a final reconstruction of all archival evidence. Nevertheless, the combination of historical-contextual reading and ecumenical sacramental interpretation provides a sufficiently robust framework for examining how triple immersion functioned both as a point of division and as a possible sign of shared Trinitarian faith in early South African Pentecostalism.

The Sacrament of Triple Immersion: An Overview

The topic of baptism can be understood within the broader context of the sacraments in the Christian tradition. Baptism is not the only sacrament that signifies initiation; other sacraments include the Eucharist and foot washing. Additionally, there are various

approaches to baptism across Christian denominations, such as total immersion, partial immersion, triple immersion, and aspersion (Jensen 2012; Schmid 2019). Some Christian traditions also recognise sprinkling as a form of baptism (Schmid 2019, 12). Other churches, especially African Independent Churches, practise sprinkling not as a baptismal method but as part of a healing ritual. Partial immersion involves immersing half of the baptised person's body while water is poured over the upper part. Total immersion, also called submersion or full-body baptism, means wholly immersing the individual in water. Aspersion involves pouring water over the baptised person, which some Christian traditions accept as a valid method. Scholars like Jensen (2012, 384) prefer submersion over aspersion, arguing that the true essence of baptism is "to submerge [the whole body and head fully under water] rather than the potentially more partial action of being immersed or doused with water from above." However, when sufficient water for full immersion is not available, aspersion may serve as an alternative. In some denominations, such as the Catholic Church, if a particular method like aspersion is prescribed, other types of baptism may not be accepted for membership (Schmid 2019, 3). In these cases, a specific approach becomes mandatory rather than optional. Triple immersion involves immersing an individual three times during a baptism ceremony. This differs from single immersion, where the person is baptised once.

The early church embraced the practice of baptism as a way of identifying with the life, the death, and the resurrection of Jesus. Immersion has been accepted as the common practice, but in the absence of water, pouring has been considered as an alternative approach. However, baptism by triple immersion has been the most accepted approach in early Christian history. One of the church fathers who supported the idea of baptism by triple immersion is Tertullian, who is quoted in Brewer (2013, 295) as saying:

To begin, for instance, with baptism: When we are about to enter the water, and, as a matter of fact, even a short while before, we declare in the presence of the congregation before the bishop that we renounce the Devil, his pomps, and his angels. After that, we are immersed in the water three times, making a somewhat fuller pledge than the Lord has prescribed in the Gospel.

For Tertullian, baptism by triple immersion became a sacrament in which the work of the evil one can be rejected (Brewer 2013, 295). Hence, baptism by triple immersion was not done alone, but in conjunction with the prayers of those about to be baptised, to make it a life-changing experience. According to Brewer (2013, 301), Tertullian was also vocal against hasty baptisms, which he categorised as those done without a relationship with Christ. Therefore, a position against child baptism was not necessarily against children per se, but in the articulation of the fact that children are not yet at a level where they can take a position where they can be accountable for their decisions to follow the Lord. For Tertullian, the process of becoming a Christian included the faith that a believer should exercise, which became a necessary step towards baptism by triple immersion.

Triple immersion is supported by the biblical text, particularly the Great Commission in Matthew 28:19: “Therefore go and make disciples of all nations, baptising them in the name of the Father, and of the Son, and of the Holy Spirit.” This text is then interpreted literally to refer to the individual’s immersion three times, simultaneously calling on the name of the Father, the Son, and the Holy Spirit. Schmid (2019, 13) explains that baptism by triple immersion “is built upon the words of Jesus in the Great Commission as it symbolizes the command to baptize into the name of the Father and of the Son and of the Holy Spirit.” But since the Great Commission is a command to baptize in the “name” in the singular, as opposed to “names” in the plural, Schmid (2019, 13) continues to argue that the text is not particular about baptism by triple immersion. Others who perceive baptism as representing the death and resurrection of Jesus Christ have argued that an individual cannot die and be resurrected three times, hence they support single immersion (Alexander 2008, 56). However, even with these criticisms of the triple immersion, it has become a popular approach, particularly among Pentecostals and the African Independent Churches. The argument in this study is that baptism by triple immersion should be understood not only in terms of its dividing elements but also in terms of how the approach can be redefined and contextualised to include its unifying elements.

The decline of triple immersion in some traditions may be attributed to theological, liturgical, and practical developments. Ferguson’s survey of early Christian baptism shows that although triple immersion remained significant in some settings, single immersion and even pouring or sprinkling were also attested, revealing that baptismal practice was historically more diverse than later uniform accounts sometimes suggest (Ferguson 2009, 456–458, 479, 567, 584, 607, 668–669). Spinks likewise traces the divergent development of baptismal rites across Eastern and Western traditions, showing how liturgical simplification and regional variation contributed to the weakening of older threefold patterns (Spinks 1982). Jensen’s work on early Christian baptismal imagery further underlines that baptism was represented and enacted in multiple ways, rather than according to one fixed ritual form (Jensen 2012, 384). From a Pentecostal perspective, Alexander demonstrates that debates over water baptism were closely tied to questions of Trinitarian orthodoxy and ecclesial unity, which helps explain why some groups retained triple immersion while others embraced forms regarded as more practical or theologically sufficient (Alexander 2008, 48–69).

Triple Immersion in Early Pentecostalism in South Africa

Baptism has long carried both theological and ecclesial significance in Christian history, with different modes of baptism often functioning as markers of doctrine, identity, and belonging. As noted earlier, triple immersion refers to the baptism of a candidate through three successive immersions in the name of the Father, the Son, and the Holy Spirit. Although this practice has roots in early Christian tradition, including the *Didache* and patristic writings, its significance in South African Pentecostalism lies not simply in its antiquity but in the way it was appropriated as a sign of biblical fidelity,

apostolic continuity, and spiritual authenticity. In this respect, early Pentecostals did not regard triple immersion as a ritual innovation, but as a restoration of what they understood to be a more ancient and theologically meaningful baptismal form (Alexander 2008; Studebaker 2011).

In early South African Pentecostalism, triple immersion emerged as an important liturgical practice during the formative years of the movement. It was closely associated with the desire to align baptismal practice with the Trinitarian commission of Matthew 28:19 and with the broader Pentecostal conviction that the church was called to recover apostolic Christianity in doctrine, worship, and mission. For this reason, baptism by triple immersion came to be seen by some early Pentecostals as more than a sacramental form; it was also a visible expression of obedience, orthodoxy, and spiritual legitimacy. In some communities, it functioned as a boundary marker distinguishing those who believed they had restored New Testament Christianity from both mainline churches and other Christian traditions whose baptismal practices were regarded as less fully apostolic (Alexander 2008).

The early history of triple immersion in South African Pentecostalism cannot be explained only through the arrival of American Pentecostal missionaries such as John G. Lake and Thomas Hezmalhalch in 1908. While these figures played an important role in the formal establishment of the Apostolic Faith Mission (AFM), the South African Pentecostal landscape had already been shaped by Zionist and Holiness currents that created fertile ground for the reception of Pentecostal teaching. In particular, the Zionist movement associated with the Wakkerstroom congregation and the ministry of Pieter Le Roux provided an important bridge between older Zionist forms of Christianity and the emerging Pentecostal movement. This connection is significant because it shows that the AFM did not arise in a vacuum or as a purely imported American phenomenon; rather, it developed through interaction between overseas Pentecostal missionaries and existing South African religious networks that were already open to themes such as healing, holiness, restorationism, and distinctive baptismal practice (De Wet 1989; Morton 2017; Nel 2005).

In this context, John G. Lake's role should be understood primarily in relation to the transmission and consolidation of these Pentecostal emphases rather than through extensive biographical detail. What is most relevant here is that Lake had been shaped by the wider Zionist-Holiness world, including the influence of John Alexander Dowie, whose movement practised triple immersion and emphasised divine healing, holiness, and apostolic restoration. These emphases resonated strongly with the developing AFM and contributed to the adoption of triple immersion as one of the movement's early sacramental practices. Within the AFM, triple immersion was not understood as a mere ritual formality, but as a concrete enactment of the Trinitarian command of Christ and as a sign of continuity with the apostolic church (Alexander 2008; George 2024; Kgatle 2025).

Triple immersion should therefore be located within a broader cluster of Pentecostal convictions that included salvation, Spirit baptism, divine healing, holiness, and the expectation of restored apostolic power. It became significant not only among white-led Pentecostal structures, but also among Black Pentecostal leaders and communities who embraced it as a biblically faithful and spiritually potent practice. Elias Letwaba, for example, played a foundational role in extending Pentecostal Christianity among Black South Africans, and his ministry reflected the wider Pentecostal commitment to baptismal forms that were seen as closely aligned with Scripture and apostolic precedent (Morton 2017). In this way, triple immersion became part of the sacramental vocabulary of early Pentecostalism in South Africa and contributed to the shaping of ecclesial identity across racial and institutional lines.

The relationship between Pentecostalism and Zionist or African Independent Church traditions is especially important in explaining the wider spread of triple immersion. Rather than existing as two completely separate streams, early Pentecostal and Zionist movements in South Africa were historically intertwined through shared personnel, overlapping networks, and common interests in healing, holiness, prophecy, and restored Christian practice. Triple immersion became one of the practices through which this overlap was expressed. It functioned not only as a baptismal method, but also as a sign of participation in a form of Christianity that sought spiritual power, biblical authenticity, and continuity with the apostolic church. For this reason, the practice extended beyond the AFM into Zionist and Apostolic churches, where it was often retained with deep seriousness and ritual significance (Anderson 2015).

This broader pattern is clearly illustrated in the case of Engenas Lekganyane and the emergence of the Zion Christian Church. According to Lukhaimane (1980, 6), Lekganyane received a directive to seek out churches that practised triple immersion, which prompted him to leave Ga-Mamabolo and travel to Johannesburg in search of such communities. This detail deserves more than passing mention, because it suggests that triple immersion had already acquired a recognised status as a marker of spiritual legitimacy and ecclesial authenticity within certain Christian circles. Lekganyane's search was therefore not merely a personal religious journey, but an indication that baptismal practice had become an important means by which emerging African church leaders discerned where true spiritual authority and authentic Christian power were believed to reside. In this sense, the directive to seek triple immersion churches reveals how baptism functioned as a bridge between Zionist aspiration, Pentecostal sacramentality, and the formation of new African-led churches.

Other African Independent Churches, such as the Zion Apostolic Church associated with Joseph and Elias Mahlangu, likewise practised triple immersion, further demonstrating the wide reach of the practice in early South African Christianity. Triple immersion thus became one of the important points of contact between early Pentecostalism and African Independent Church traditions. Although these churches differed in structure, leadership, and ritual setting, some using baptismal pools and

others rivers, they shared a commitment to baptism as a spiritually charged act of initiation and obedience. For this reason, triple immersion may be understood not only as a distinctive sacramental practice, but also as one of the ritual forms that linked early Pentecostal and African Independent expressions of Christianity in South Africa.

Baptismal Divergence in Early South African Pentecostalism

Even though triple immersion was embraced in the AFM, conflict over baptismal formula and mode, especially single versus triple immersion, emerged within early Pentecostalism in South Africa. This division was not purely theological but reflected broader tensions around spiritual authority, apostolic continuity, and liturgical purity. Others within the movement resisted this form, particularly due to their proximity to Reformed and Evangelical traditions. It must be noted that due to the influence of leaders like Pieter Le Roux, there are strong reformation elements within classical Pentecostal churches (Nel 2005). On the other hand, Le Roux can be considered such a leader who brought connections between the Zionist movement and the early Pentecostal movement, particularly the practice of triple immersion. Nonetheless, the critics of triple immersion within early Pentecostalism viewed it as excessive, superstitious, or indicative of syncretism, thus refusing to endorse ministers who insisted on the practice. These theological tensions contributed to institutional fractures in the early developments of the Pentecostal movement in South Africa. In addition, the insistence on triple immersion became a factor in the separation of African Pentecostal leaders from white-led Pentecostal missions, and the eventual formation of independent Apostolic and Zionist churches that retained the practice alongside other charismatic rituals (Mofokeng 2018, 2021; Mzondi 2023). According to Mofokeng (2018), these divisions were also cultural and racial in nature, as early white missionaries within the AFM often sought to suppress African expressions of faith that were seen as “unorthodox,” even as these expressions, such as triple immersion, were deeply rooted in African Pentecostals’ interpretations of Scripture and charismatic experience. Thus, triple immersion functioned as both a theological stand and a form of resistance against imposed Eurocentric liturgical norms. In early Pentecostalism, sacramental practices like triple immersion were not neutral rites but vehicles for contesting power, theology, and ecclesial identity. The divisions they catalysed were symptomatic of deeper theological and sociocultural struggles that shaped the contours of Pentecostalism in the region.

In the early development of Pentecostalism in South Africa, triple immersion served as a spiritual and theological crucible from which multiple Pentecostal streams would emerge. In other words, as many early Pentecostals differed on the baptismal approach, it led to the establishment of different Pentecostal churches, which alone led to the proliferation of Independent Churches. One prominent figure who had a different approach to baptism is James W. Brooke, founder of UAFC. Mahlangu (2021, 2) explains that “Pastor James Brooke left England on February 10, 1912, and arrived in Cape Town, South Africa, seventeen days later; then entrained for the 1,400 kilometres

journey to Johannesburg. He met up with Pastor Isaac Ramalepe in the then Northern Transvaal, who became the first African Pastor of the United Apostolic Faith Church in 1912.” James was instrumental in shaping divergent baptismal theologies that would influence the identity and structure of South African Pentecostal churches. In contrast to Lake, James W. Brooke, a British missionary from London, followed a more Evangelical-Holiness trajectory rooted in the Wesleyan revivalism of Britain. While initially connected to the broader early Pentecostalism, Brooke’s approach diverged on key ecclesiological matters, including baptism. Upon founding the UAFC, Brooke instituted single immersion baptism, performed once in the Trinitarian formula. This practice, though theologically orthodox and still Pentecostal in nature, emphasised spiritual regeneration over ritual form and aligned more closely with traditional Protestant models of baptism (Studebaker 2011). To date, UAFC believes in immersing the baptised person once in water, whilst the AFM believes in immersing individuals three times in water, which is a fundamental divergent point within classical Pentecostal churches in the South African context.

Despite both churches affirming the Trinitarian formula, their divergent modes, triple immersion in the AFM and single immersion in the UAFC, became markers of distinct ecclesial identities. These baptismal differences were not just liturgical preferences but reflected broader theological frameworks and missionary influences. Lake’s North American Pentecostalism emphasised signs and apostolic authority, while Brooke’s British background lent itself to structured simplicity and doctrinal clarity. As such, the fragmentation of the early development of Pentecostalism in South Africa was driven in part by these sacramental and theological divergences. Baptism became a site of differentiation and, in some instances, contestation, as the early Pentecostal movement solidified into formal denominations. These distinctions highlight how missionary origin, theological heritage, and sacramental emphasis contributed to the shaping of South Africa’s Pentecostal landscape. In the South African context, this further intensified the various approaches to baptism, exacerbating the divisions that existed due to racial and ethnic differences. In churches like AFM and UAFC, where baptismal pools were separated along racial lines, the sacrament became more divisive than unitive.

The segregation of baptismal pools in churches such as the AFM and UAFC requires further theological attention, because it reveals that baptismal divergence in early South African Pentecostalism was not only doctrinal but also spatially and racially embodied. As a sacrament of initiation into the body of Christ, baptism ought to have signified equality before God and shared incorporation into one ecclesial community. Yet the maintenance of racially separated baptismal spaces undermined this sacramental logic by reinscribing social hierarchy within a rite meant to witness to spiritual unity. Consequently, baptism became not only a site of theological disagreement over mode, but also a visible marker of racial exclusion and unequal belonging. This helps explain why many African Pentecostals and later Independent Church movements experienced separation from white-led Pentecostal structures not merely as institutional rupture, but as a necessary search for ecclesial dignity and liturgical self-determination. Therefore,

in insisting on one approach to baptism over the other, some ethnic groups did so in the quest to become independent. However, the theological aspects of either approach cannot be ignored as some view triple immersion as affirming the Great Commission as espoused in Matthew 28:19, whilst others view single immersion as the quest to maintain the unity of the Trinity. Therefore, the diversity of the baptism approach needs to be approached carefully—hence, a proposition, here, of triple immersion as a unifying sacrament in the Pentecostal movement.

Triple Immersion as a Unifying Sacrament in Pentecostalism

While historically the practice of triple immersion baptism contributed to fragmentation within the early Pentecostal movement in South Africa, recent developments and renewed theological dialogue suggest that the same practice may serve as a symbol and vehicle of unity. Indeed, when revisited through a shared Trinitarian lens, triple immersion holds unifying potential both within the Pentecostal tradition and the broader Body of Christ. Fundamentally, both the AFM and the UAFC maintain baptism in the name of the Father, Son, and Holy Spirit, in full fidelity to Matthew 28:19. Although they differ in the mode (triple vs. single immersion), both traditions affirm the Trinitarian structure of Christian baptism. The Trinitarian formula is a widely accepted approach to baptism not only within Pentecostalism but in the Christian tradition in general (Alexander 2008; LaCugna 1989; Studebaker 2011). The formula in the use of the “name” in singular as opposed to “names” in plural is very significant, as it demonstrates the unity of the Trinity. This demonstrates that the Father sends the Son, and the Holy Spirit is also sent by the Father as requested by the Son. This also means that the baptised person already acknowledges and even affirms the Trinity by being initiated in the name: God the Father, the Son, and the Holy Spirit. Therefore, when the church embraces this formula, it demonstrates the obedience of the church in not only fulfilling the Great Commission but in acknowledging the importance of the Trinity in baptismal practices. This common theological ground offers a critical foundation for dialogue and convergence, particularly as Pentecostal churches increasingly participate in global ecumenical engagements. This means that in as much as Pentecostals can differ in terms of single or triple immersion, the Trinitarian formula, which is accepted by most Pentecostals, is a unifying factor.

Any proposal of triple immersion as a unifying sacrament must also engage the principal counter-arguments raised by advocates of single immersion. In relation to Matthew 28:19, single-immersion proponents argue that the singular term “name” points to the unity of the Triune God rather than to three separate immersions (Beasley-Murray 1962). Similarly, Romans 6:3–4 is frequently invoked to support single immersion on the grounds that baptism signifies participation in the once-for-all death, burial, and resurrection of Christ, not a repeated ritual sequence (Castelein 2007). Moreover, while the Acts narratives attest the widespread practice of baptism in the apostolic church, they do not explicitly furnish examples of triple immersion; the latter is more clearly attested in the subsequent liturgical development of the early church (Ferguson 2009).

These considerations suggest that triple immersion cannot be claimed as an unambiguous biblical requirement. Nevertheless, this does not render the practice theologically deficient. Rather, triple immersion may be received as a legitimate ecclesial interpretation of Trinitarian baptism, one which developed within the history of Christian worship and which, in the Pentecostal context, can be appreciated as a sacramental expression of shared faith rather than a necessary point of exclusion.

Recent efforts underscore this movement towards reconciliation. In a historic development, the AFM International, under the leadership of Rev. Frank Chikane and Rev. George Mahlobo, together with the UAFC South Africa and its subsidiary regions, then led by Apostle Russel Peters and Apostle Moses Mabunda, signed a Memorandum of Cooperation (MoC) on 24 August 2019 in Nairobi, Kenya. This agreement formally recognised their shared theological roots, common historical origins, and mutual mission in Africa and beyond. This agreement is not merely administrative; it reflects a deepening commitment to healing historical wounds, many of which were fuelled by early disagreements over ecclesial authority, race, and sacramental practice, including baptism. Leaders from both denominations have acknowledged that they trace their origins to the same founding year of Pentecostalism in South Africa (1908), and that their initial divide need not define their future collaboration. This MoC marks a turning point: It demonstrates a shift from boundary-drawing to bridge-building, where theological differences are respected without necessitating division. In this light, triple immersion can be reinterpreted not as a symbol of exclusivity, but as a shared sacramental heritage, an expression of submission to the Triune God, and a sign of full initiation into the Body of Christ. The threefold immersion mirrors the threefold unity of the Godhead, and this theological symbolism can be embraced across both traditions, regardless of mode. Therefore, the use of the Trinity, particularly God the Father, the Son, and the Holy Spirit, is a unifying factor in the practice of baptism. Thus, whether the baptised individual is dipped once (single immersion) or thrice (triple immersion), should not divide Pentecostals as long as the Triune God is involved in the practice. Furthermore, whether dipped once or thrice, all Pentecostals agree on practising full immersion as opposed to partial immersion or even aspersion.

From an ecumenical perspective, baptism is increasingly understood as a basis for Christian unity through mutual recognition across traditions (Kärkkäinen 2007; WCC 2011). In this article, that insight is most clearly seen in the AFM-UAFC relationship, where renewed cooperation shows that differing modes of immersion need not prevent unity when shared Trinitarian faith and common mission are affirmed. Thus, triple immersion may be reinterpreted not as a permanent marker of division, but as part of a shared Pentecostal sacramental heritage.

Conclusion

This study looked at one of the important sacraments in early Pentecostalism, baptism by triple immersion. This sacrament was studied as an approach to baptism by dipping the baptised person three times in water in the name of the Father, the Son, and the Holy

Spirit. The challenge is that among the early Pentecostals, baptism by triple immersion became a dividing factor, particularly between the AFM South Africa and the UAFC. This article proposes another angle to the sacrament of triple immersion that looks at the unifying factors. The study found that both classical Pentecostal churches mentioned above believe in the baptism in the name of Father, the Son, and the Holy Spirit. This is a fundamental unifying factor that should be emphasised over and above the dividing factor of dipping the person in water three times. This factor can move these two churches towards the unity of classical Pentecostal churches, which alone can become an important factor in the unity of the body of Christ. Therefore, this study makes an important contribution to the study of triple immersion in early Pentecostalism by arguing that we should not only look at the dividing and negative factors but also the important unifying factors within the same sacrament. Pentecostal scholars and historians will find this study an important one that brings a balanced approach to the study of the theology and practice of triple immersion.

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