

AN ETHICAL APPROACH TO THE PARTICIPATIONS IN THE EUCHARIST: AN EXEGETICAL STUDY OF 1 CORINTHIANS 11:27-30

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Abstract

The one ultimate model of behaviour for Christians all over the world has always remained Jesus Christ, whose way of life is presented for them to imitate. But then, beside Christ's exemplary life style, there are numerous instructions from Him which Christians should adhere to in order to please God. Most of these instructions and actions were later termed Sacrament from the early Christian doctrines. The Eucharist also rendered as the Lord's Supper was not just an act which Christ performed or instituted but one which he further instructs his followers to do always. Little wonder, Paul the author of 1 Corinthians saw the need to emphasize on this act by repeating Christ's statement thus; *touto poieite eis ten emen anamnesin* (do this in my remembrance). To further emphasize on the sacred nature of the Eucharist, Christians were warned on what their attitude and moral standard should be like in order to partake in it. In this work however, effort was not geared towards adding to or removing from what the biblical instructions towards the Eucharist stated but on understanding and interpreting them from an exegetical approach especially when it comes to unethical attitude towards this act as a sacrament instituted by Jesus Christ. It is the position and belief of the researcher that the Sacrament of the Eucharist if well handled by Christians could go to a greater extent in restoring health, peace and harmony which are gradually drifting away in the contemporary Christian Church and the society at large. This work is therefore, primarily concerned with a deep and interpretative study of 1 Corinthians 11: 27-30. The study is therefore ambivalent; exegetical, Philosophical and reflective. The first part dealt with the interpretation while the second part dealt with the reflection on how this phenomenon could take the Christian Church to greater height as the body of Christ if properly harnessed.

Keywords: Eucharist, unworthy, ethical, participation and exegesis

Introduction

Jesus Christ as the founder of Christianity instituted numerous religious acts and practices which has remained unique to Christians up to the contemporary times. Through doctrinal teachings and beliefs of the early Christians, some of these acts were separated from others and were termed 'Sacraments'. To mention few of them, we have Baptism which is commonly done to initiate one into Christendom, marriage, commonly done to join a man and a woman as husband and wife, the Lord's last supper known as the Eucharist or rather Holy communion which Christ established prior to His death etc. However, note is worth taking of the last act mentioned above which goes with an adjective "Holy". The Eucharist like other Sacraments has Christ deeply involved in it; an act in which He made His disciples eat of his body and blood.

However, throughout the early days of Christianity, the Eucharist has remained a mystery. Hence, it is not surprising that Paul the Apostle of Christ finds time to emphasize more on this act and what Christian's attitude towards it should be like. 1 Corinthians 11:23-30 contains Paul's teachings to the Corinthian Christians regarding the Eucharist. Effort is therefore made in this research to interpret and further reflect over Paul's statements to help contemporary Christians ponder once more over their behaviour towards the Eucharist.

It is crystal clear that a greater number of the Church clergy are performing their roles in teaching their congregations the real doctrine of Christianity as was handed down from Christ, the early Apostles and the early Church fathers. Having witnessed the celebration of the Eucharist a greater number of times both in the Roman Catholic Church and in few of the Protestant Churches and it would be very insincere

of the writer to say that he is never used to hearing the officiating Priest say “If any is Holy, let him come, if any is not holy let him repent”. The above statement simply summarizes the fact that the Eucharist is not an act a Christian should partake in, in an unworthy manner.

Paul, while writing to the church in Corinth as regards to the Lord’s Supper clearly stated that their unworthy manner towards the Eucharist has resulted to many of them being weak and ill even as many have died. Today, in most Churches, whenever the Eucharist is celebrated, large number of people troop to the altar to receive of the body and blood of Christ. Thus, it may not be wrong to ask, are all these people worthy to participate in this Act? If there are those who are taking it in an unworthy manner, could it not be part of the reason why we have a lot of strange illnesses in our contemporary Churches in Nigeria? Considering the rate at which evil is being perpetrated today and people are dying prematurely, could this not be part of the reason? Just as Apostle Paul stated “*o` ga.revsqi,wnkai. pi,nwnkri,mae`autw/| evsqi,eikai. pi,neimh. diakri,nwn to. sw/ma*” (for whoever eats and drinks without discerning the body eats and drinks judgment upon himself” 1Cor. 11:29), and the question still remains, have the Christians of today not eaten and drunken judgment upon themselves by participating unworthily in the Eucharist?

Meanwhile, despite the teachings and warnings of the clergy during Holy Communion (Eucharist) in our contemporary churches, one can hardly boast of seventy-five per cent (75%) of worthy participants in the act. Again, this paper also posits that not only should one be worthy before participating in the Eucharist but should also go on to live a worthy life after taking it. A greater number of atrocities being recorded among Christians today go to question the effect of most religious acts which Christians engage in. The Eucharist as it stands may not possess great transforming power as such but it is believed that its effectiveness depends on the mindset of the participants. This is a problem which calls for investigation. Hence, the researcher aims to embark on exegetical approach to Paul’s teaching in 1 Cor. 11: 27:30.

This research is also aimed primarily at churches that practice the Eucharist but may misconstrue its true biblical Christian character and mandate or handle the exegesis unethically.

It therefore tends to do the following:

- i. To once more call back to the knowledge of Christians the meaning of the concept of Eucharist.
- ii. To explain what is meant by participating in the Eucharist in unworthy manner.
- iii. To present to Christians that the Eucharist if well-handled can be a remedy to most life challenges.

All the above would be achieved with the exegetical interpretation of the epistle of Paul in 1 Corinthians 11: 27-30.

Clarification of Concepts

In a critical discussion such as this, it is very vital for one to be as coherent and comprehensive as possible. Hence, for this to be achieved, it becomes very expedient that the major or key terms used in the paper be clarified or rather defined. This would be done as follows.

Eucharist

The word Eucharist which is derived from the Greek word *eucharistia (eukaristia)* meaning “thanksgiving” is used to designate the sacramental rite of the offering and consumption of bread and wine (Mckenzie, 1965). According to Mckenzie (1965), the word Eucharist does not appear in the New Testament; it is first employed in the Didache (last 1st century) and is used by Ignatius of Antioch and Justin. In the New Testament it is called “the Lord’s Supper” (1 Cor. 11:20) and possibly “the breaking of bread” (Acts 2:42, 46; 20: 7, 11.)

For Leon-Dufour (1968), the Eucharist entails thanksgiving and blessing. For him, the Eucharist itself means the gratitude which is the source of thanksgiving. This meaning, the most ordinary use in profane

Greek, is also found regularly in the Greek Bible, especially in human relations. This blessing-thanks is however, found particularly in Jewish meals where the blessings both praise and thank God for the good which He has given men. Paul speaks in this sense of eating with “thanksgiving” (1 Cor. 10:31).

Unworthy

The term “unworthy” is an English adjective which modifies something as not having the necessary qualities to deserve something especially respect (Hornby, 2000:1316). Its opposite is worthy. In other words, for something to be unworthy, it means that it is not acceptable to someone or somebody or even something of high position or importance. For example some opinions could be said to be unworthy of educated people. Its noun is unworthiness.

Mifflin (2000), views the word “unworthy” as an adjective which modifies something that is insufficient in worth; something undeserving; a bad plan unworthy of our consideration. Something that lacks values or merit is unworthy or worthless and is therefore not suiting or befitting. Something vile or despicable is unworthy. For something to be unworthy, such a thing is not commendable or creditable. It could be an unworthy action or an unworthy person.

Ethical

First is to understand what ethics is which according to Kant in his *Grounding for metaphysics of morals*, 1785, is the philosophy of moral law, which determines what is right and wrong. By this, it implies that ethics determines what actions are morally permissible or impermissible. It can also be seen in the light of philosophy as rational inquiry into moral principles, not based on personal opinions. From this definition, it becomes pertinent to understand that to be ethical means to engage in moral reflection and deliberations, considering the common good and the well-being of all (Sandel, 2009)...to acknowledge the unique moral veneration, the otherness in others, respecting their autonomy and dignity, minimize harm and maximize benefits and be guided by principles of honesty, (Ricoeur, 1990).

From the forgoing clarifications, it is obvious that ethics simply means to be ethical. The two words are interdependent. Ethics provides the substance and framework for understanding what is ethical and by extension, it becomes safe to say that ethical actions and decisions reflect ethical principles.

Participation

The English noun “participation” denotes the act of taking part in an activity or event (Hornby, 2000:849). Its verb “participate” mean to take part in or become involved in an activity. Using the Eucharist for example anyone who is involved in it is therefore participating in it and could be referred to as a participant.

Mifflin (2000) explains participation as an act of taking part or sharing in something. Here, it implies sharing or benefiting in or from the activities of a group by a member. In other words it could be an individual participation or group participation that is participation by all members of a group.

In the words of Zuck (2002), “Exegesis is the exposition or explanation of a text based on a careful, objective analysis.” The word for him literally means “to lead out of”. That means that the interpreter is led to his conclusions by following the text. Obviously, only exegesis does justice to the Biblical text. It is concerned with discovering the true meaning of the text, respecting its grammar, syntax, and setting. Exegesis allows us to agree with the Bible.

The process of exegesis involves (1) Observation: what does the passage say? (2) Interpretation: what does the passage mean? (3) Correlation: how does the passage relate to the rest of the Bible? And (4) Application: how should this passage affect one’s life?

Exegesis, simply put is a critical explanation or interpretation of a text, particularly a religious text. It is a systematic process by which a person arrives at a reasonable and coherent sense of the meaning and message of a biblical passage. Here, an understanding of the original text (Greek and Hebrew) is required.

Establishment of the Textual Form and Orientation

Here, effort is made to view the text, 1Corinthians 11:27-30 with an exegetical lens, pointing out its textual problems if any. This would be followed by the delimitation/orientation of the text.

a. Textual Criticism of 1Corinthians 11:27-30

Nestle – Aland presents the text as: **1Corinthians 11:27-30**

²⁷ {Wste o[ja'nevsi,h| to.na;rton h' pi,nh| to. poth,riontou/ kuri,ouavnaxi,wj(e;nocoje;staitou/ sw,matojkai. tou/ ai[matojtou/ kuri,ou²⁸ dokimaze,tw de. a;nqrwpoje`auto.nkai. ou[twjevktou/ a;rtouevsqie,twkai. evktou/ pothri,oupine,tw\ <sup>29</sup> o` ga.revsi,wkai. pi,nwnkri,mae`autw/| evsqi,eikai. pi,neimh. diakri,nwn to. sw/ma<sup>30</sup> dia. tou/to evnu`mi/n polloi. avsqenei/j kai. a;rrwstoikai. koimw/ntaii`kanoi,³¹

A comparison of this text with other variants reveals few textual difficulties. This section would be devoted to the few prominent ones.

In v. 29, the subjunctive present indicative verb *pi,nwn* appeared unchanged in D⁴⁶. It also appeared in another ancient manuscript a codex vaticanus and equally in a* ABC* 33 1739 it^ocopsa, bogeo Hesychius^{lat}. Hence, due to the difficult nature of reading in this verse, it appears to be much in line with the ancient manuscripts above which are apparently the original texts. However, in the more recent variants, like Pelagius, it was rendered as *pi,nwnavnaxi,wj* which may have been intentionally done to make the reading much easier thereby corrupting the original text or manuscript. The same was seen in a²C² DFG Y0150681. Meanwhile, in some other variants like Basil Chrysostom (Cyril) John-Damascus; AmbrosiasterPacian, Jerome and Augustine, the adjective *avnaxi,wj* was written after the preposition *gar*. Since it is known that the more difficult the reading of a text is, the more closer it is to the original and the ancient manuscript, the rendering of the subjunctive verb *pi,nwn* in the text remains probably close to the original manuscript.

Also, in the same verse 29, the neuter noun *sw/ma* remains the same in papyrus 46 (i⁴⁶), and equally so in the corrected version of codex vaticanusa* ABC* 6 33 424^C 1739 it^ovgww. ^St^syrpal cops abo Pelagius Augustine. But then in a² C³ D F G, the body (*sw/ma*) was presented as “Body of the Lord” (*sw/ma toukuri,ou*). This could be in order to specify on a particular body but since the ancient manuscript did not have it this way, this is obviously an intentional addition. Other variants have it with the addition of Lord Jesus (*kuri,ou/Ihsou/*), these include 0150 81 104 256 263 365 424*. In Basil Chrysostom (Cyril) Hesychius^{lat}; Ambrosiaster Pacian Augustine^{1/2}, it was rendered as *ai-ma toukuri,ou* (blood of the Lord). All these are recent manuscripts and thus, the text here has nothing in common with them. Therefore, the *sw/ma* in the text appears to be closer to the original manuscript without any alteration.

Orientation of the Text

For a proper exegesis of 1Corinthians 11:27-30, one requires the understanding of the logic of the text. One can only understand and follow the logic and sense, if one is able to set out the text as a unit of its own. Delimitation of the text is therefore, the primary concern of this section.

The background of this text takes us back to Paul's observation of the abuse at the Lord's Supper among the Christians in Corinth as seen in his first letter to the Corinthians 11:17-23, which further led him into reminding them of the institution of the Lord's Supper (1Corinthians 11:23-26 cf: Matthew 26:26-29; Mark 14:22-25; Luke 22:14-20). According to Fee (1987), Paul takes up a second abuse of Christian worship (cf. 11:2-16), and divisions at the Lord's Supper (v.18), predicated along sociological lines (v. 22). For Fee, Paul apparently had anticipated this concern in his previous reference to the table in 10:17, where he reminded them that because they all eat the one loaf, they together constitute the one body of Christ. Their 'divisions' at the Table are giving the lie to the unity that their common partaking of the bread is intended to proclaim.

Fee further notes that the greatest difficulty in reconstructing the problem is to overcome our own familiarity with part of the text, which usually has been informed within a two realities: (1) the nearly universal phenomenon of cultic meals as part of worship in antiquity, and (2) the fact that in the early Church, the Lord's Supper was mostly eaten as, or in conjunction with such a meal. In contrast however, most contemporary Christians have kept the "food" but have rather completely lost the symbol of the meal just as the Corinthians had kept the meal but were in grave danger of the meal as well (Fee, 1987).

The major characters here are the Corinthian Christian believers as no specific person was mentioned by name. Paul appears to be addressing the Church in general as was seen in his writing in v.18 "For, in the first place, when you assemble as a Church, I hear that there are divisions among you; and I partly believed it". However, exegetical verses here are just pericope of Paul's exhortations to the Church in Corinth as we see in 1Corinthians 11. The verses 27-30 were carefully selected since they bear the direct exposition of the unworthy attitude of the Church towards the Eucharist. Thus they serve as the delimitation of this analysis.

Presentation of working translation

The proposed translation is presented as thus: "27 Therefore whoever eats the bread or drinks the cup of the Lord unworthily, will be guilty of sin of the body and of the blood of the Lord. 28 But let a man examine himself and thus eat from the bread and drink from the cup. 29 For whoever eats and drinks, not discerning the body, eats and drinks judgment on himself. 30 For this reason, among you, many are weak and ill and some are dead."

Exegesis of the Text

The above text is simply Paul's exhortation to the Corinthian Christians in regard to their abuses at the Lord's Supper. Having taken time to remind them of the divine and real presence of Christ in this act, he went on to notify them of the dangers of participating in it in an unworthy or improper manner. Hence, 1Corinthians 11:27-30 remains the only significant warning on what the Christians' behaviour towards the Holy Eucharist should be like. No one is advised to stop partaking in this sacrament but then, if you must partake, beware of your attitude as a Christian for so many have invited sickness and death upon themselves by approaching the Eucharistic feast in improper way.

Semantic Analysis of the Passages

This text is very rich in style and sound. An interpretation of the text makes an understanding of words used a necessity. The verbs, both main and subordinate clauses are highlighted differently and then commented upon very briefly. Phrases, clauses, and sentences would also be given a technical clarification wherever and whenever necessary. It shall follow a pattern of analysis of verse after verse beginning with v. 27.

V. 27

The verbal clause: *Wste ojj a'n evsqi,h to.n a;rton h' pi,nh*

Here, *wste* is working as a conjunction super ordinate which could be understood as 'so there', 'so that' or 'therefore'. It links what has been said in the previous verses before v.27. Parsing/comment: *ojj* = relative adjective pronoun, nominative masculine singular. It is rendered in the text as 'whoever', meaning 'anyone'.

a'n is an untranslatable particle which makes a statement contingent; a verbal particle. It indicates an act that may or may not happen.

Parsing/comment: *evsqi,h* = the 3rd person singular, present subjunctive mood, active voice of the verb *e.sqi*. Here, it expresses wish or possibility of anyone eating the meal in an improper manner *avnaxi,wj* (whoever eats unworthily).

to.na;rton: accusative neuter singular of the noun *a]rtoj* which means 'the bread'. The article *h'* is a conjunction coordinate article meaning 'or'.

Parsing/comment: *pi,nh* = the 3rd person singular, present subjunctive mood, active voice of the verb *pinw*. It equally expresses possibility of drinking of the cup. We also have '*estaias* the 3rd person singular, future indicative mood, active voice of the verb *ei],mi*.. It expresses an action likely to come in future or subsequently (will or shall).

V.28

Parsing/comment: *dokimaze,tw* = the 3rd person singular, present imperative mood, active voice of the verb *dokimazw*. It expresses command in this context (examine or prove yourself). *De* = a conjunction particle, making the super addition of a clause, whether in opposition or in continuation to what has proceeded. *A,nqrwpoj* = a man; a person in Greek expression. *E`auto.n* = the accusative masculine of the 3rd person singular of personal pronoun (himself).

The verbs *e,sqi* and *pinw* are also rendered in their imperative moods here. *E,sqietw* = 3rd person singular, present imperative mood, active voice of the verb *e,sqi*. *Pinetw* = 3rd person singular, present imperative mood, active voice of the verb *pinw*. They both express command (let him eat and let him drink).

V.29

Main verbal clause: *o` ga.revsqi,wnkai. pi,nwnkri,mae`autw/] evsqi,eikai. pi,neimh. diakri,nwn to. sw/ma*

Parsing/comment: *evsqi,wn* = the active nominative masculine singular, present participle of the verb – *evsqi* – to eat. In this context, it expresses a continuous action; whoever will keep eating. *Pi,nwn* = the active nominative masculine singular, present participle of the verb – *pinw* – to drink. It indicates the continuous drinking of the wine which is the blood of Christ. The word *krima* is a neuter noun meaning 'judgment'. *mh. diakri,nwn to. sw/ma*: Here, we have the negation particle *mh.*; which could mean 'not' or 'without', and the active present participle, nominative masculine singular of the verb *diakrinw* – to discern, to weigh or to judge. With the negation particle, the phrase means 'without discerning the body'. *Sw/ma* is the accusative neuter singular of the noun *sw/matoj* - body. Trial (2001) averred that the phrase 'not discerning the body' implies the Lord's body and therefore means not understanding correctly the purifying effect of fellowship with Christ. It means partaking in a way that dishonours Christ.

V.30

Main verbal clause: *evnu`mi/n polloi. avsqenei/jkai. a;rrwstoikai. koimw/ntaii`kanoi,*

evnu`mi/n: The dative preposition ‘in’ with the 2nd person plural of the noun pronoun ‘you’. In the text, this could mean ‘in you’, ‘within you’, or ‘among you’. *Polloi*: Adjective pronoun, nominative masculine plural of *polluj* meaning ‘much’ or ‘many’. *Avsqenei/j*: Adjective nominative masculine plural of *avsqenhj* meaning ‘weak’. *A;rrwstoi*: Adjective nominative masculine plural of *a;rrwstoj* meaning ‘sickly’ or ‘weak’. *Koimw/ntai*: 3rd person plural present indicative passive deponent of the verb *koimaomai*- to fall asleep (to die). *I`kanoi*: This is an adjective pronoun nominative masculine plural of the word *i`kanoj* meaning ‘sufficient’ or ‘considerable’. In the text, this indicates or refers to number; a sufficient number or a considerable number. Paul is of the opinion that the unworthy attitude of the Corinthians towards the Eucharist has led to many among them being weak as a result of sickness and also a considerable number of them having died or fallen asleep. This death could be both physical and spiritual death.

A look at the text as it is

Going through 1Corinthians 11:27-30, one would evidently see the continuous emphases on the term ‘body’. The Eucharist itself is an embodiment of the body and blood of Christ. Again, the Corinthian faithful were warned not to partake in this act without examining the body for whoever does so is guilty of sin against the body and blood of Christ. When effort was made to understand the Eucharist as a sacrament of unity, the concluding remark was that since Christians all eat of the one loaf, they together constitute the one body of Christ. Being one body here is a clear indication that what affects one equally affects the other. Thus, when Christians are seen today tussling, fighting and killing each other over material things and political positions, the notion of being one body in Christ becomes questionable in all ramifications.

The Churches in Nigeria and the Eucharist

The Catholic Church rightly regards the Eucharist as the most important of the seven (7) sacraments of the Church as contained within what appears to be a small wafer of bread as the body, blood, soul and divinity of Jesus Christ. Unlike many Protestant denominations in Nigeria, the Catholic Church practices what is called closed communion. In other words, while other churches might welcome Christian of a different denomination to share in their “communion services”, “ordinances of the Lord’s Supper”, “Holy Communion” or whatever they might call their sharing of bread and wine, the Catholic Church does not allow non-catholic to receive the Eucharist. However, a catholic apologist must be prepared to not only explain what the Church teaches about the reception of the Eucharist, but also why she teaches this. Hence, for the Catholics, closed communion does not lead to division; division leads to closed communion.

A Catholic apologist therefore must be worthy towards the Eucharist as the unworthy reception of communion causes both scandal to the Church and very real spiritual damage to the individual who is receiving communion unworthily. Thus, in order to receive communion, a Catholic must be in a state of grace (that is, not in a state of mortal sin), have been to confession since his committing his last mortal sin, believe in the doctrine of transubstantiation and observe the Eucharistic fast. The Catholic Church therefore teaches that a Catholic must be in a state of grace following 1Corinthian 11:27-28 “Whoever, therefore, eats the bread or drinks the cup of the Lord in an unworthy manner will be guilty of profaning the body and blood of the Lord. Let a man examine himself, and so eat of the bread and drink of the cup”. Here, the need to be in a state of grace is the most important requirement for receiving communion, and may never be dispensed with (Catechism of the Catholic Church, 1994).

For the vast majority of Anglicans, the Eucharist also called “Holy Communion” is the central act of gathered worship: the appointed means by which Christ can become present to his Church. For the majority of Anglicans this event constitutes the renewal of the Body of Christ as the Church through the reception of the body of Christ as the Blessed Sacrament, his spiritual body and blood. In this sacrament, Christ is both encountered and incorporated (they partake of Him). As such, the Eucharistic action looks

backwards as a memorial of Christ's sacrifice, forward as a foretaste of the heavily banquet and to the present as an incarnation of Christ in the lives of the community and of individual believers (Gibson, 1912).

According to D.C. Ezeobi (personal communication, October 13, 2014), all the Anglican apologists who are confirmed by the Bishop and are in good standing (free from mortal sin) are qualified to receive the Holy Communion. He equally asserted that the Eucharist possess transformatory power which could only be experienced depending on individual conviction. In other words, when one receives with faith and penitential heart, effective result must be achieved. Hence, when one receives the Eucharist without repenting from one's sins, it amount to unworthy act towards the Eucharist and one becomes endangered to the resultant effects recorded in 1 Corinthians 11:27-32.

However, it may not be wrong to assert that not all the so called "Pentecostal" churches in Nigeria observe the Eucharistic feast. But then, the Redeemed Christian Church of God (RCCG), a Protestant Pentecostal evangelical movement of Pastor Enoch A. Adeboye, believes that the Holy Communion or the Lord's Supper is instituted by the Lord Jesus Christ shortly before His death. He commanded all Christians to gather together regularly to share the bread and wine till He comes back again. This injunction is observed in all the parishes of this domination worldwide. Here, it is held once a month from the evening hours.

The Apostolic Christian Church (ACC) expresses the purpose of Holy Communion to symbolize a believer's spiritual union with the body of Christ, the Church, and by taking the sacrament; one indicates he/she is at peace with God and man. It is equally believed here, that one must not take Holy Communion while living ungodly life because when an unrighteous man takes it, it attracts curse to him; it can lead to death, sickness or open the doors for evil attacks.

Implication to Churches in Nigeria

It is quite apparent that all the Christian Churches in Nigeria, those that observe the Eucharist, have some common understanding towards the sacrament even though; there may be some variants in their belief. They all view the Eucharist as a very Holy Sacrament instituted by Jesus Christ himself before his death. They all understand it as a sacrament of unity; an act that unites the Church as a body of Christ. As a result of its sacred nature, the Churches are aware of what unworthy participation in the Eucharistic feast could result to. A vast majority, still vividly understand it as an act done in remembrance (avna,mnhsiz) of Christ. In other words, the Eucharist to a greater number of the churches in Nigeria is the most important of all the sacraments instituted by Christ.

However, the problem today, remains that most of all these beliefs end in theory and are hardly practiced. Thus, the question still lingers; with the Churches' partaking in the Eucharist, a sacrament of unity, are the churches in Nigeria United? With the high rate of murder witnessed in Nigeria among Christians, is the Eucharist actually taking effect? Does the desperate tussle for power in the Churches today seen even among the clergy indicate a Church that partakes of the body and blood of Christ? When will the Church in Nigeria become the salt and light of the world? Would not the Church and its leaders appear like hypocrites, when they engage in all sorts of rancour and then mount the pulpit or go out to preach the gospel of Christ with the sole aim of converting those outside of the fold and bringing them into the Church? Would it be wrong to attribute most of the strange deaths and sicknesses seen among Christians today as well the divisions to unworthy participation towards the sacrament of Eucharist? This research work is still calling all Christians both the clergy and the laity back once more to a moment of pondering over the Eucharist as a sacrament which has the tendency of being a remedy to most of the life problem Christians face today, if only it would be worthily handled. But then, before drawing on any conclusion, a hermeneutical approach would be employed towards the text of exegesis; 1 Corinthians 11:27-30.

1 Corinthians 11:27-30: Hermeneutical Approach

The teachings of Paul in 1 Corinthians 11:27-30 is the mind of God and as such incontestable. This could equally be ascertained from his earlier statement in v 23 of this same chapter; “for I received from the Lord what I also delivered to you... However, the theological impact of 1 Corinthians 11:27-30 had been questioned by various scholars and Christian believers. The greatest of these questions being, what does it mean to take the Eucharist in an unworthy manner? In this extract, Paul was very simple in his use of words as he did not speak in parable or proverb.

Having observed the manner in which the Corinthian handle the Lord’s Supper, which is still prevalent in our Churches today, Apostle Paul saw the need to exhort them to be cautious of their attitude. With his knowledge and rich experience in the gospel of Christ, he went on to warn that whoever eats of the body of Christ and drinks of the cup in an unworthy manner, will be guilty of profaning the body of the Lord. To make this clearer, in v.29 he states that whoever eats drinks without discerning the body, eats and drinks judgment upon himself. At this point, mention could be made of Judas Iscariot, one of the twelve that worked with Christ. In Mathew 26: 18-25, we saw Judas, a man who already bears evil in his mind and being fully aware of this, coming to receive of the body and blood of Christ when it was initially instituted. Of course, Christ did not prevent him from receiving but it was very apparent that Judas received damnation unto his soul. After partaking in this unworthy way, Judas went out from light into darkness. This has continued to be the case in our present day Churches. A lot of Christians keep approaching the Lord’s Supper with one evil plan or the other against their neighbour. Few hardly do the “discerning” admonished by Paul.

Paul in this extract is equally speaking from a firsthand experience. In v. 30, he states, “that is why many of you are weak and ill, and some have died”. A lot of Christians today are taking most biblical injunctions for granted probably because of the general belief that we are living in the “era of grace”. They however forget that no sin goes unpunished. Paul clearly asserted in Galatians 6:7 that we should not be deceived; God is not mocked, for whatever a man sows, that he will also reap. Contemporary Christians should not forget that this same ‘grace’ was present when Ananias and Saphira died miserably in the early Church for their sin (Acts 5). It is however, quite common to start blaming Satan or the devil whenever a Christian is visited by premature death or strange illness in our Churches today. But here, Paul, with his observations is stating that the unworthy attitude of the Corinthian Christians towards the Lord’s Supper has led to the death of many while many are still weak and ill in their midst.

Fee (1987) is not of a different opinion when he averred that the Christian’s abuse of the Lord’s Supper seems to move in two directions; horizontal and vertical. The primary problem was an abuse of the Church itself. Some are despising the Church of God by humiliating those who have nothing. At the same time, however, such an abuse of the “body” is an abuse of Christ himself. The bread represents his crucified body, which, along with his poured out blood, made effective the death that ratified the new covenants. Thus, by Christian’s abuse of one another, they are also abusing the one through whose death and resurrection they had been brought to life and formed into this new eschatological fellowship, his body the church.

Finally, Paul writes to take Christians all the way back to the actual words of institution (Cor. 11:23-26), so that they will restore the meaning of the Eucharist to its rightful place in their mind. “Do this, in remembrance of me”, to which Paul adds “for as often as we celebrate this meal, we proclaim the Lord’s death till he comes”. Christians today are admonished to eat in the Eucharist with one another, focusing on Christ’s death which brought them life; and they should do so as eschatological people, awaiting his return. Even as they do so, they must “discern the body”; otherwise they put themselves under the same condemnation as those who crucified Christ in the first place (v.27).

Summary

The summary of this work is that the Eucharist remains a unique and Holy Sacrament and should be treated as such. Christians should not regard it as a mere routine as this is what has led many into participating in it in unworthy ways. For Christ to have given us the privilege to partake of his body and blood means that he truly loves us. We should be mindful of how we treat this gift so as not to appear as taking Christ's love for granted. This love should be properly reciprocated and appreciated.

Again, this work still believes in the transforming power of the Eucharist. It is a sacrament which can revive a dead soul, it can heal all sorts of diseases but at the same time can destroy a soul and can bring about all sorts of diseases. Paul proclaims this in 1 Corinthians 11: 30. In other words, the Eucharist is like a two – edged sword which can make or mar, it is like a naked electric cable which can generate light when properly fixed and can also electrocute one to death when carelessly handled. This is why Underhill (1996), observes that in the Eucharist, what we recognize has the power to change us, whether we like it or not. This change could be positive or negative depending on personal convictions or state. No one partakes in the Eucharist and remains same, its either Christ continues to dwell in you or he departs from you. Christians should beware of this and take precautions.

Conclusion

This work was never geared towards discouraging anyone from partaking of the body and blood of Jesus Christ which make up the Eucharist. The Eucharist remains open for all Christian faithful. In fact, in the course of this research, it was discovered that one of unworthy participations towards the Eucharist is “not participating at all”. Hence, Christians who do not partake of the Eucharist are already profaning the body of Christ. In John 6:53, Christ himself proclaimed, “Truly, I say to you, unless you eat the flesh of the son of man and drink his blood, you have no life in you; he who eats my flesh and drinks my blood has eternal life, and I will raise him up at the last day.” What this implies is that every Christian must partake of the Eucharist and must be worthy in doing so.

For the same reason, Avramis (2004) shortlisted fasting, confession of sins and frequency of participation as prerequisite for the reception of the Eucharist. Thus, this work is concluding that the Eucharist if worthily approached can go a long way in rendering solutions to various life challenges experienced among contemporary Christians. The divine healing we constantly seek, the change we always cry and yawn for in our country, the wealth we tirelessly seek etc can always reach us if we worthy receives Christ and bears him in our life through the Eucharist. But then, when approached unworthily, disaster will always be the end result both for the individual and the Church as the body of Christ. Again, as a sacrament of unity, the Church should not be divided both physical and spiritually even as they partake in the Eucharist. The idea of brining dichotomy between the rich and the poor in most churches today, does not speak well of a church that partake in the sacrament of unity; the Eucharist.

Recommendations

The Eucharist remains a unique sacrament. It should not be doubted that before the incarnation of the Word (Jesus Christ), baptism has been invoke, as well as marriage, ordination of priests and the other sacraments. But then the Eucharist is a sacrament which Christ Himself instituted; a sacrament in which he shared his body and blood with his followers. Because of this, this sacrament deserves special treatment. It is on this backdrop that this work wishes to give the following recommendations to all Christians in order to avoid unworthy participation in the Eucharist.

1. All Christians, both the clergy and the laity should take up the responsibility of reminding one another the dangers of participating in the Eucharist in an unworthy manner.
2. The above can only be achieved through the second point which is a call to radical and intense study of the Holy Scripture. It is very sad that today, a vast majority of the Christians hardly studies the scripture. The quest to get rich quick and conquer poverty has blinded all and even the clergy is not exempted in this. Without an in-depth study of the scripture, spiritual decadence becomes the order of the day in our

Churches. This was why Paul in 2 Timothy 2:15, exhorts, “study to show yourself an approved man unto God, a workman that needed not to be ashamed, rightly dividing the word of truth”.

3. Thirdly, Christians should stop taking God’s grace and mercy for granted. Of a truth, Christ has paid the debt for our sins on the cross and Paul equally states that we now live under grace. However, this does not indicate that sins today go unpunished. Paul said it all when he remanded Christians that whatever one sows, that will he surely reap. Many have destroyed their souls with the mentality of our being “sinners saved by grace”.

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