

COVENANT MEAL OR MIRACLE MEAL? A CRITIQUE OF HOLY COMMUNION SERVICE IN SELECTED NIGERIAN CHURCHES IN THE CONTEXT OF 1 CORINTHIANS 11:24-29

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Abstract

There are significant theological and ethical issues raised by the increasing trivialisation and commercialisation of Holy Communion in Nigerian churches, which warrant thorough scholarly investigation. The serious warnings against unworthy participation in 1 Corinthians 11:24-29 are largely overlooked in existing research on Eucharistic practice in Nigeria, which often highlights its communal, healing, and charismatic features. This study examines four Nigerian denominations, including the Redeemed Christian Church of God, Living Faith Church (also known as Winners Chapel), the Catholic Church, and the Apostolic Faith Church, to critically analyse how Holy Communion is understood and misinterpreted in practice. The aim is to gain a better understanding of these churches' views and practices regarding the sacrament, with particular focus on its communal, ethical, and covenantal dimensions. The research is confined to these four denominations to facilitate a focused comparative theological analysis within contemporary Nigerian Christianity. A qualitative methodology, incorporating doctrinal analysis, participant observation, and a review of official church documents, provides a detailed insight into sacramental practices. Results indicate a widespread neglect of ethical preparation and covenantal theology, resulting in the commodification of rituals and undermining communal integrity. The study concludes that Nigerian churches must reclaim a balanced Eucharistic theology that includes covenant fidelity, ethical seriousness, and communal responsibility. It advocates for renewed catechesis, enhanced pastoral oversight, and contextually appropriate sacramental discipline.

Keywords: Holy Communion. Eucharistic theology. Nigerian churches. Sacramental discipline. Covenant meal.

INTRODUCTION

The Holy Communion, also known as the Lord's Supper or Eucharist, is a key doctrine and principle of Christian worship. Instituted by Jesus Christ during the Passover meal (Matthew 26:26-28; Mark 14:22-24; Luke 22:19-20), it serves as a covenant meal that symbolises believers' participation in the salvific work of Christ, fostering both communal unity and individual sanctification. Paul's theological explanation of this sacred ordinance, particularly in 1 Corinthians 11:24-29, emphasises the importance of approaching it with reverence. The focus on the covenantal and memorial aspects has been replaced by its reinterpretation as a "miracle meal" aimed at physical healing, prosperity, and deliverance, despite its foundational significance in contemporary Nigerian Pentecostal and charismatic Christianity. This change reflects broader trends in African Christianity, where doctrinal purity is often replaced by pragmatic spirituality. Recent studies by Olofinjana and Ukah underline how Nigerian Pentecostalism's developing theology and innovative practices sometimes blur the lines between traditional sacramental theology and practical, need-based faith expressions.ⁱ

Although many have examined the development and dynamics of Pentecostalism in Nigeria, few studies have critically examined the Eucharistic theology and practices, particularly in light of Paul's cautions against unworthy participation. Ukpong's in-depth research on African Biblical hermeneutics highlights the predominance of contextual reinterpretations, which frequently result in doctrinal errors.ⁱⁱ Moreover, recent research by Ajiboye and Adewale demonstrates that many congregations emphasise the benefits of Holy Communion without providing sufficient theological support for the risks and repercussions of partaking in an unworthy manner.ⁱⁱⁱ The growing tendency in some Nigerian congregations, especially in churches like Winners Chapel and the Redeemed Christian Church of God (RCCG), to interpret Holy Communion primarily as a therapeutic or miracle-oriented rite rather than as a covenantal

act of ecclesial remembrance and ethical commitment has led to a theological gap that this study seeks to fill. Moreover, the practice of allowing children and sinful adults to partake in the meal diminishes its sanctity. According to Alalade, the psychological dynamics of communal shame exacerbate the issue by compelling people to engage in unworthy behaviours to avoid social exclusion.^{iv}

This study endeavours to assess how Holy Communion is interpreted and practised in four Nigerian churches while critically analysing its theological and spiritual implications as stated in 1 Corinthians 11:24-29. The purpose of this study is to highlight the ramifications of the “miracle meal” narrative and propose a restoration to Eucharistic theology’s covenantal purity. This research is essential because an inadequate understanding of sacramental doctrine can harm the doctrinal consistency and spiritual well-being of the entire church community, including misleading individual believers. This study compares and contrasts the Redeemed Christian Church of God (RCCG), Winners Chapel, Catholic Church, and Apostolic Faith Church’s practice of the Holy Communion to offer corrective theological insights and useful suggestions that are consistent with Biblical teachings.

This article examines four key Nigerian church services of the Holy Communion. These churches represent a spectrum of theological traditions ranging from Pentecostal-charismatic to sacramental-liturgical. The geographical focus is Nigeria, given its unique religious landscape and the strong influence of Pentecostalism on national religious consciousness. These churches were chosen because of their sizable membership and unique stances on Holy Communion, which make them perfect for theological comparison. To keep the study’s focus thematic, it only examines doctrine and liturgical practice, leaving out other sacramental practices.

The significance of this article is multifaceted. Theologically, it advances the current discussion about sacramental integrity and how to properly interpret Eucharistic theology in

African contexts. It attempts to bring modern practice in line with Biblical requirements by providing a Pauline hermeneutic based on 1 Corinthians 11:24-29. In practice, it offers ordinary believers, theologians, and church leaders a critical framework for evaluating and changing existing Communion practices. Moreover, it provides valuable perspectives to ecumenical organisations striving for spiritual revitalisation and doctrinal unity across denominational boundaries. Since the majority of recent publications in Nigerian and African Eucharistic studies focus on ecclesiastical expansion, prosperity theology, and charismatic expressions rather than on sacramental theology in practice, this study addresses a significant scholarly need in the field.^v

Methodology

This study adopted a qualitative research design that integrates exegetical, doctrinal, and empirical approaches. Data were gathered through textual analysis, involving a close exegetical reading of 1 Corinthians 11:24-29, supported by relevant biblical scholarship and contemporary theological commentary. In addition, document analysis was employed, focusing on denominational literature such as official church manuals, catechisms, doctrinal statements, liturgical guides, pastoral letters, and published sermons relating to the practice of Holy Communion in the selected churches. Semi-structured interviews were also conducted with clergy and theologians from the respective denominations to explore their theological interpretations and liturgical practices. Finally, the researcher engaged in participant observation by attending Holy Communion services in selected congregations to examine how Eucharistic doctrine is enacted in practice. These complementary methods were chosen to bridge the gap between theological text and ecclesial praxis, enabling a holistic understanding of both doctrinal intent and lived sacramental experience.

Theological and Contextual Backgrounds of the Holy Communion

According to the Bible, the Lord's Supper, also known as the Eucharist, is a covenant feast that strengthens and renews the bond between God and His people. It fulfils the theological functions of *koinonia* (participation or fellowship) and *anamnesis* (remembrance). The narratives of the Last Supper in the Synoptic Gospels (Matthew 26:26-29; Mark 14:22-25; Luke 22:19-20) establish the Eucharist as an extension and fulfilment of the Passover. The prophetic promise of a new covenant in Jeremiah 31:31-34 is echoed in these narratives when Jesus refers to the cup as "the new covenant in my blood," reinterpreting the Passover supper in light of His redemptive death rather than just commemorating Israel's liberation from Egypt.^{vi}

Paul emphasises the community aspect of the supper in 1 Corinthians 10:16-17 with his Eucharistic theology. As members of Christ's body, believers are also members of "one body", sharing in the "one bread". This act's communal and covenantal nature emphasises each participant's holy duty to approach the table with unity and discernment.^{vii} The dynamic nature of remembrance has been highlighted by recent research as being more than just historical memory. According to O'Collins, anamnesis places the Eucharist within a larger narrative arc of redemptive history involving an eschatological expectancy and an anticipatory participation in the coming messianic supper.^{viii}

The Eucharist was considered the primary act of worship in the early Church and was considered to be inextricably linked to the Church's identity. Those who entered the meal without faith and moral integrity were criticised by early fathers like Justin Martyr and Ignatius of Antioch, who emphasised the actual presence of Christ in the elements.^{ix} In his First Apology, Justin Martyr (c. 155 CE) emphasised the necessity of appropriate preparation and baptismal initiation before partaking in the Eucharist, describing it as a spiritual offering as

well as a memory. In the same vein, Irenaeus protected the sacrament's realism from Gnostic inclinations by emphasising the Holy Communion as the actual body and blood of Christ.^x

The transubstantiation dogma, which was confirmed at the Fourth Lateran Council (1215) and the Council of Trent (1545-1563), was the culmination of the medieval church's formalisation of Eucharistic theology. The Reformers did not deny the Communion's covenantal and sacred nature, but they did contest some elements of medieval sacramentalism. Calvin focused on the spiritual real presence mediated by the Holy Spirit, while Luther maintained a strong sense of Christ's real presence ("sacramental union"). Zwingli maintained the meal's communal and covenantal significance while adopting a memorialist stance. According to recent research, such as that conducted by DeFranza, these Reformation arguments are a reflection of broader concerns about the relationship between divine grace and human involvement.^{xi}

Modern theological movements have grappled with the tension between sacramental realism and symbolic memorialism. In many African cultures, Eucharistic theology has been shaped by charismatic reinterpretations that emphasise existential advantages like healing and deliverance, as well as indigenous ideas of communal meals as places of covenant and life-sharing. The Holy Communion has been refashioned as a "miracle meal", with a focus on practical benefits rather than theological depth, especially in Nigerian Pentecostal and charismatic churches. Nwankwo notes that this change frequently results from a contextual desire to meet urgent material demands, but it unintentionally poses the risk of compromising the social and covenantal nature of the sacrament.^{xii}

As acts of spiritual empowerment, reconciliation, and covenant renewal, ceremonial feasting and communal meals are highly valued in African traditional religious rituals. African Christians' perceptions and interactions with the Holy Communion are inherently shaped by such frameworks. Christian sacramental theology can benefit from these cultural matrices, but there are limitations as well. As Bediako warns, the propensity to emphasise effectiveness and

quick fixes might obscure the eschatological, covenantal, and formative aspects that are essential to biblical teaching.^{xiii} Moreover, African church contexts mirror the social pressure to partake in sacred meals, even if they are not prepared, because skipping Holy Communion could be interpreted as a sign of communal disloyalty or spiritual incompetence. Similar to Paul's criticism of the Corinthian abuses, this pressure frequently results in broad participation by undeserving individuals.

In Nigeria, the theology and practice of the Holy Communion show notable denominational diversity. As an example, the Catholic Church places significant value on confession before reception, rigorous catechesis, and transubstantiation. Participation is restricted to individuals who have completed sacramental confession and formal First Communion instruction. In contrast, the Holy Communion is often presented in RCCG and Winners Chapel as a miracle meal, broadly accessible to attendees, including children who may not have undergone structured doctrinal instruction such as believers' classes, foundation classes, or new members' orientation programmes. The emphasis in such contexts frequently falls on deliverance, prosperity, and healing. Frequently, the emphasis is on deliverance, prosperity, and healing. Conversely, the Apostolic Faith Church maintains a rigorous holiness theology that necessitates a public attestation of character and a comprehensive self-examination before participation.

These denominational doctrines demonstrate a general inaccuracy of Paul's cautions in 1 Corinthians 11:24-29 regarding discerning the body and participating in self-examination, even though they reflect some of the theological framework. Despite being supposedly inclusive, the movement towards democratising access to the frequently jeopardises the meal's crucial disciplinary and covenantal components. A biblically grounded theology of Holy Communion highlights remembrance of Christ's saving death (Luke 22:19; 1 Corinthians 11:24-26), participation in the life of Christ and His body (1 Corinthians 10:16-17), covenant commitment

(Luke 22:20; cf. Jeremiah 31:31-34), thanksgiving (Matthew 26:27), and eschatological hope as believers proclaim the Lord's death "until he comes" (1 Corinthians 11:26).

Recent Nigerian theological scholarship, such as Okafor's work, cautions against reducing Holy Communion to a utilitarian means of seeking material benefits and instead calls for a recovery of its covenantal, communal, and Christ-centred significance.^{xiv} Holy Communion's theological and contextual underpinnings demonstrate its deep covenantal and community nature, which is based on biblical revelation and has been traditionally protected by the church. Nigerian practices today, particularly the focus on the Holy Communion as a "miracle meal," reflect the dire circumstances of the day, but they also pose significant pastoral and theological problems. There is an urgent need to restore a comprehensive theology of the Holy Communion that is based on Scripture and sensitive to cultural settings without becoming enslaved by them.

Exegesis of 1 Corinthians 11:24-29

Paul's profound pastoral concern for a community struggling with moral, social, and doctrinal ambiguity is evident in the Corinthian letters. The misuse of the Lord's Supper was one of these problems, which he specifically addressed in 1 Corinthians 11:17-34. The supper that was supposed to proclaim unity and Christ's selfless love had instead become a place of social stratification and spiritual danger; hence, Paul's admonition was not only about proper dining manners but also an ecclesiological and theological problem. A multicultural port city, Corinth was greatly influenced by Greco-Roman patronage and social structures. Social differences were frequently strengthened during communal dinners, where the rich ate sumptuous food and drink while the poor went famished.^{xv} The entire foundation of the Lord's Supper was violated when the church replicated these differences.

1. The Text

²⁴ καὶ εὐχαριστήσας ἔκλασεν καὶ εἶπεν· Τοῦτό μου ἐστὶν τὸ σῶμα τὸ ὑπὲρ ὑμῶν· τοῦτο ποιεῖτε εἰς τὴν ἐμὴν ἀνάμνησιν. ²⁵ ὡσαύτως καὶ τὸ ποτήριον μετὰ τὸ δειπνῆσαι, λέγων· Τοῦτο τὸ ποτήριον ἡ καινὴ διαθήκη ἐστὶν ἐν τῷ ἐμῷ αἵματι· τοῦτο ποιεῖτε, ὡσάκις ἐὰν πίνητε, εἰς τὴν ἐμὴν ἀνάμνησιν. ²⁶ ὡσάκις γὰρ ἐὰν ἐσθίητε τὸν ἄρτον τοῦτον καὶ τὸ ποτήριον πίνητε, τὸν θάνατον τοῦ κυρίου καταγγέλλετε, ἄχρι οὗ ἔλθῃ. ²⁷ Ὡστε ὃς ἂν ἐσθίῃ τὸν ἄρτον ἢ πίνη τὸ ποτήριον τοῦ κυρίου ἀναξίως, ἔνοχος ἔσται τοῦ σώματος καὶ τοῦ αἵματος τοῦ κυρίου. ²⁸ δοκιμαζέτω δὲ ἄνθρωπος ἑαυτόν, καὶ οὕτως ἐκ τοῦ ἄρτου ἐσθιέτω καὶ ἐκ τοῦ ποτηρίου πινέτω· ²⁹ ὁ γὰρ ἐσθίων καὶ πίνων κρίμα ἑαυτῷ ἐσθίει καὶ πίνει μὴ διακρίνων τὸ σῶμα.^{xvi}

Translation:

²⁴ and when he had given thanks, he broke it, and said, “This is my body, which is for you. Do this in remembrance of me.” ²⁵ In the same way, he also took the cup, after supper, saying, “This cup is the new covenant in my blood. Do this, as often as you drink it, in remembrance of me.” ²⁶ For as often as you eat this bread and drink the cup, you proclaim the Lord’s death until he comes. ²⁷ Whoever, therefore, eats the bread or drinks the cup of the Lord in an unworthy manner will be guilty concerning the body and blood of the Lord. ²⁸ Let a person examine himself, then, and so eat of the bread and drink of the cup. ²⁹ For anyone who eats and drinks without discerning the body eats and drinks judgment on himself.^{xvii}

2. Textual and Lexical Analysis

Verse 24: “This is my body, which is for you; do this in remembrance of me”.

The phrase *τοῦτό μου ἐστὶν τὸ σῶμα τὸ ὑπὲρ ὑμῶν* (“This is my body, which is for you”) emphasises sacrificial substitution. The preposition *ὑπὲρ* (*hyper*) indicates the vicarious action of Christ’s body given “for” the benefit and salvation of believers.^{xviii} The command *τοῦτο ποιεῖτε εἰς τὴν ἐμὴν ἀνάμνησιν* (“do this in remembrance of me”) underscores the memorial (Greek *anamnesis*) function. Contrary to a mere intellectual recollection, *anamnesis* denotes a liturgical re-presentation of Christ’s once-for-all sacrifice, making its benefits spiritually present to participants.^{xix}

Verse 25: “This cup is the new covenant in my blood”.

Here, Paul invokes Jeremiah 31:31-34, affirming the eschatological new covenant mediated through Christ's blood. The term *διαθήκη* (*diathēkē*) signals a binding covenant rather than a simple agreement, highlighting the gravity of Communion as a covenantal renewal.

Verse 26: “For as often as you eat this bread and drink this cup, you proclaim the Lord’s death until he comes”.

Participation in the Holy Communion functions as a public proclamation (*καταγγέλλετε*) of Christ’s death. It affirms the believer’s allegiance to Christ’s atoning work and points forward to the eschatological hope (“until he comes”). As Hays notes, this verse ties practice directly to the narrative arc of redemption, balancing anamnesis and anticipation.^{xx}

Verse 27: “Whoever, therefore, eats the bread or drinks the cup of the Lord in an unworthy manner will be guilty concerning the body and blood of the Lord”.

The adverb *ἀναξίως* (“in an unworthy manner”) does not describe the moral worthiness of the individual but rather the improper, irreverent manner of participation. Fee contends that Paul criticises those who approach the table carelessly or divisively, thus profaning its sanctity.^{xxi} Being “guilty of the body and blood” implies identification with those responsible for Christ’s death, suggesting that irreverent partaking is akin to betrayal.^{xxii}

Verse 28: “Let a person examine himself, then, and so eat of the bread and drink of the cup”.

Self-examination (*δοκιμάζετω δὲ ἄνθρωπος ἑαυτόν*) calls for moral and spiritual introspection, not mere ritualistic preparation. Garland emphasises that this reflects an ethical and communal responsibility rather than individualistic piety alone.^{xxiii}

Verse 29: “For anyone who eats and drinks without discerning the body eats and drinks judgment on himself”.

The phrase “discerning the body” (*μὴ διακρίνων τὸ σῶμα*) has generated considerable debate. While some commentators, like John Calvin, consider “the body” to refer to Christ's physical,

sacrificial flesh, others understand it in an ecclesiological sense, referring to the church as Christ's body. More recent scholarship argues for a twofold sense that keeps together both the sacrificial body of Christ and the social body of believers.^{xxiv} Failure to “discern” the body, therefore, results in *κρίμα* (judgement), not only divine disapproval but concrete spiritual consequences, including illness and death (v. 30), which Paul presents as representations of divine discipline within the covenant community.

3. Interpretative Implications

These texts have been the subject of significant observations from recent scholars. As a proleptic declaration of the kingdom, Richard B. Hays highlights the supper's communal and eschatological aspects.^{xxv} Gordon D. Fee draws attention to the socioeconomic disparities that underlie the atrocities in Corinth and links them to current injustices in church practices.^{xxvi} Anthony C. Thiselton highlights the complicated meaning of “discerning the body”, promoting a hermeneutic that is particularly relevant in situations like Nigeria's, where individualism and community interact in intricate ways.^{xxvii} According to David E. Garland, the supper necessitates ecclesial solidarity and active moral accountability, two things that are frequently absent from practical miracle-oriented theologies.^{xxviii}

Paul's caution against unworthy participation is a plea to preserve the Holy Communion's covenantal sanctity rather than merely a moralistic command. A dedication to the cruciform life, integrity, and unity is required for participation in the supper, which is an act of covenant reaffirmation. The pressure to participate in the Holy Communion despite one's lack of merit is similar to Paul's concern in Corinth, where group meals frequently have social and symbolic connotations. By substituting individualistic or transactional methods for covenantal depth, the commercialisation and “miracle meal” myth further weaken the need for introspection and ecclesial unity. Churches are at risk of encouraging a consumerist spirituality, which Paul expressly cautions against, by redefining the Lord's Supper as a way to achieve miracles

without undergoing a corresponding ethical shift.^{xxix} A fundamental theological and ethical basis for comprehending Holy Communion can be found in 1 Corinthians 11:24-29. It drives churches to uphold a holy, covenantal viewpoint based on introspection, group harmony, and Christ-centred declaration. Paul's initial intent is essentially distorted by any practice that downplays these imperatives, such as the focus on the "miracle meal" without accompanying moral and spiritual integrity.

Comparative Analysis of Selected Nigerian Church Practices

The Redeemed Christian Church of God (RCCG)

Rev. Josiah Akindayomi established the Redeemed Christian Church of God in Lagos, Nigeria, in 1952. RCCG started as a holiness movement that emphasised rigorous moral discipline, fasting, and spiritual detachment from "worldly" influences. It originated from the Cherubim and Seraphim tradition.^{xxx} Following Akindayomi's passing in 1980, Pastor Enoch Adejare Adeboye took over as leader. He carried out significant theological and structural changes that established RCCG as a major Pentecostal organisation worldwide.^{xxxi} Under Adeboye's direction, RCCG quickly spread throughout Nigeria and abroad, focusing on healing, evangelism, prosperity, and charismatic spirituality. With more than 40,000 parishes spread across more than 190 countries, RCCG has expanded by Adeboye's strategic vision to establish a church within five minutes' walking distance of every city on earth.^{xxxii}

RCCG's theology is deeply Pentecostal, emphasising Spirit-imbued existence, sanctity, and individual redemption. A key element represents the "four-fold" focus upon salvation, sanctification, divine healing, and Christ's impending second coming.^{xxxiii} RCCG underscores holiness alongside moral integrity, then advocates prosperity and triumph theology because they depict Christian existence as perpetual spiritual plus earthly success. This prosperity dimension is commonly incorporated into its sacramental practices, as well as incorporating Holy Communion.^{xxxiv} According to RCCG doctrine, Holy Communion is a way to receive

divine healings and breakthroughs in addition to commemorating Christ's atoning sacrifice. The Communion, as Pastor Adeboye frequently teaches, is "a meal of supernatural empowerment," intended to infuse the believer's physical and spiritual state with divine vitality.^{xxxv} This view combines more contemporary charismatic emphasis on immediate practical advantages with traditional Pentecostal healing tropes.

Holy Communion is celebrated monthly in RCCG, usually on Thursday before the Holy Ghost Service, which is held on the first Friday of each month at the Redemption Camp in Ogun State and in local parishes worldwide. The administration is very much structured:

1. Only ordained full Pastors or Assistant Pastors can consecrate and administer the meal.
2. The bread and wine (usually non-alcoholic) are prepared centrally and distributed in a reverent atmosphere with extensive worship.
3. Emphasis is placed on orderly conduct, collective worship, and an atmosphere of solemn expectancy for miracles and deliverance.

During the service, worshippers are often instructed to "claim" specific miracles while partaking, supporting the practical and experiential orientation of RCCG's Holy Communion theology. This practice distinguishes RCCG from more traditional sacramental traditions where the focus is strictly on memorialisation and covenant renewal.^{xxxvi}

Holy Communion, according to the Redeemed Christian Church of God, is only permitted for "born again" believers who have received immersion baptism in water.^{xxxvii} The foundational believers' classes (Workers-in-Training and Baptismal classes) are the main avenues for providing doctrinal instruction. These classes teach fundamental concepts such as salvation, sanctification, and Christian living. However, rather than concentrating on in-depth sacramental theology, these schemes frequently emphasise moral behaviour and church doctrine.^{xxxviii} The practical application of this self-examination is mostly individualistic, depending on personal conscience rather than ecclesiastical discipline, even though participants are urged to examine themselves and refrain from engaging in an "unworthy" manner. This is in contrast to practices that need pastoral approval or a formal confession before

the communion's admittance. Adeyemi criticised RCCG's doctrinal instructional method for lacking theological depth regarding the sacrament, claiming that it frequently puts miraculous expectations ahead of ecclesial accountability and covenantal integrity.^{xxxix}

Pastor Enoch A. Adeboye's many sermons, in which he highlights the gravity of approaching the Lord's Table without true spiritual regeneration, lend credence to this doctrinal perspective. The Communion is for the true children of God, those who have confessed their sins, been cleansed by the blood, and been baptised by immersion, as Adeboye states.^{xl} However, in practical terms, RCCG's implementation of this dogma exposes considerable inconsistencies. Empirical observations and ethnographic studies show that during large Holy Communion services, especially at regional and national Holy Ghost gatherings, the verification of individual eligibility is minimal or absent. As Adeyemi observes, these services often involve thousands of participants, making individual pastoral oversight practically impossible.^{xli}

Moreover, rather than being an act necessitating rigorous ecclesial discipline, the ambience of RCCG Communion observances tends to emphasise community participation as an act of corporate faith and hope of miracles. This inclusive urge is strengthened by Pentecostal pragmatism's theology of instant access to divine power. According to Macaulay, "While the doctrinal standard is restrictive, the practical impulse in Nigerian Pentecostalism leans towards openness as a demonstration of faith and spiritual solidarity."^{xlii} Members of certain RCCG parishes are known to carry excess Communion meals home, which presents another challenge based on recognised and anecdotal behaviours.^{xliii} Occasionally, family members who may not be "born again" or even formally identified as Christians share these meals. According to this notion, the consecrated meal has innate healing and protective properties, making it a type of apotropaic (protective) sacramentalism comparable to several native African religious behaviours.

African religio-cultural presumptions regarding the power of sacred food have formed a hybrid sacramental perspective, which is reflected in this phenomenon. It also shows how recognised theological exclusivity and popular, pragmatic religiosity clash. Nwankwo argues that such activities demonstrate the elasticity of Pentecostal sacramental theology in Nigeria, where the quest for spiritual efficacy often overrides canonical boundaries.^{xliv} Meanwhile, this pattern runs counter to Paul's instruction in 1 Corinthians 11:27-29 to examine oneself and the risks of unworthy involvement. At least in many parishes and major gatherings, the RCCG's practice encourages a consumerist and recuperative approach to the sacrament rather than fostering a cautious and disciplined Eucharistic community. From a theological perspective, this discrepancy shows a gap between the RCCG's professed principles and its core practices since more rigorous training and ecclesiastical supervision processes are needed. Unfortunately, without such structures, the Communion runs the risk of turning into a "ritualised spectacle". As a result, it would not be a covenantal act of great spiritual significance or collective accountability.

Living Faith Church Worldwide (Winners Chapel)

Bishop David O. Oyedepo founded Living Faith Church Worldwide, also referred to as Winners Chapel, in 1981 following what he claims was an 18-hour divine vision in May of that year in Ilesa, Nigeria.^{xlv} Originally founded in Kaduna, the church later relocated its headquarters to Lagos, and then to the vast Faith Tabernacle in Ota, Ogun State, which is today considered one of the largest church auditoriums in the world.^{xlvi} Since its founding, Winners Chapel has always emphasised faith, prosperity, and dominion theology, which is reflected in its annual flagship event, Shiloh, and many "breakthrough" conferences.^{xlvii} The church has expanded into a global network that now includes churches in more than 65 nations as well as numerous publishing, educational, and humanitarian organisations.

The theology of Winners Chapel centres on what Bishop Oyedepo calls “the liberation mandate,” which is delivering humanity from all oppressions of the devil through the preaching of the Word of Faith.^{xlviii} Core to this theology are the doctrines of:

1. The centrality of faith as a tool for dominion in all spheres of life.
2. The “covenant practice” is the belief that specific spiritual laws (such as tithing, sacrificial giving, and service) activate divine blessings.
3. An emphasis on prosperity and health as signs of covenantal faithfulness.

Winners Chapel refers to the Holy Communion as the “Miracle Meal,” and it is included in this theological framework not primarily as a commemoration or covenant renewal, but rather as a tool for “enforcing” material advancements, divine health, and victory over adversaries.^{xlix}

Holy Communion, according to Oyedepo, is a spiritual mystery intended to directly transfer God’s life into a believer’s physical body and surroundings. According to him, “The Communion is not just a religious ritual; it is a spiritual weapon, a power meal that flushes out sickness and destroys all satanic oppressions.”¹

In Winners Chapel, Holy Communion is held monthly, often on the first Sunday, and may also be administered during special services, including midweek covenant services every Wednesday evening. The service is structured but open to all worshippers present, regardless of prior catechetical background. The elements used are bread and red fruit juice, symbolising the body and blood of Christ, respectively. The service begins with faith declarations, calling participants to expect instant healings, deliverance, and tangible miracles. The congregation is led to confess affirmations such as “I receive strength, divine immunity, and breakthrough as I partake.” Contrasting sacramental traditions that emphasise quiet self-examination, the atmosphere during Communion in Winners Chapel is characterised by collective uproar, dancing, and immediate testimonies, reflecting a performative and pragmatic spirituality.

Holy Communion at Winners Chapel does not require specialised catechetical classes that are primarily focused on Holy Communion. Instead, lessons on the Communion are incorporated

into Bishop Oyedepo's books, conferences, and more general sermons. Members are encouraged to participate "by faith," and the requirement that is frequently emphasised is the readiness to have confidence in the mystery's effectiveness. The line separating "believers" from guests or non-regenerated people is rarely upheld in the church.^{li} Immediate practical advantages are heavily emphasised, including financial breakthroughs, disease treatment, curse removal, and spiritual empowerment. Instead of introspective remorse, the communicants are urged to approach the table with "battle-ready" faith. The "pragmatic sacramentalism" prevalent in modern African Pentecostal movements is reflected in this practice, according to Asamoah-Gyadu.^{lii}

The portrayal of Holy Communion as a "miracle meal" runs the risk of turning a covenantal sacrament into a transactional tool for private benefit, even as the theology of liberation and religious empowerment strikes a deep chord in many African contexts. Such a strategy, as Nwankwo observes, tends to obscure the social and covenantal aspects of the Holy Communion in favour of a hyper-individualistic spirituality motivated by pressing demands.^{liii} In addition, Paul's instructions in 1 Corinthians 11:27-29, where he forewarns of dire repercussions for unworthy participation, are contradicted by the lack of rigorous catechesis and self-examination. Winners' Chapel places less emphasis on repentance, purity, and group accountability and more on rewards like healing, breakthroughs, and protection, probably with an assumption that all the communicants are believers; therefore, stressing only the physical benefits. This strategy runs the risk of trivialising the seriousness of the sacrament, even though it might promote widespread involvement and experiential engagement.

A common misconception among members is that Communion is a routine "spiritual supplement" rather than a holy covenantal act that calls for discernment and introspection. This is partly due to Communion's open accessibility, regardless of spiritual status.^{liv} Moreover, similar to RCCG procedures, there have been cases recorded where congregants collected leftover Communion elements to children or non-members at home for family usage. Such

behaviours point to a popular theology that combines Christian and native African religious logics in a syncretic way, viewing consecrated objects as magical charms.^{lv} This practice poses a significant theological challenge, as it essentially modifies the meaning of the sacrament from communal covenant renewal to individualistic spiritual commodity, thus contradicting both scriptural mandates and historic Christian institutions.

The Catholic Church

The Catholic Church is one of Nigeria's oldest Christian traditions, dating back to the late 15th-century Portuguese missionary work along the country's coast.^{lvi} However, the Society of African Missions (SMA) in Lagos (1860s) and the Holy Ghost Fathers in Eastern Nigeria (1885) established mission stations, marking the beginning of a significant Catholic presence in the 19th century.^{lvii} Through medical and educational missions, the Catholic Church quickly grew and emerged as a major player in both religious and sociopolitical life. It had powerful diocesan institutions, native clergy, and important lay organisations like the Catholic Women's Organisation (CWO) and the Catholic Youth Organisation of Nigeria (CYON) by the 20th century.^{lviii} Nigeria has one of the largest Catholic populations in Africa, with approximately 30 million adherents spread across over 50 dioceses presently. The Church is recognised for its doctrinal stability, sacramental discipline, and significant social interventions, including schools and hospitals.^{lix}

In Catholic theology, the Holy Communion (Eucharist) is the "source and summit of the Christian life."^{lx} The Church teaches transubstantiation, which holds that the bread and wine keep their appearances during the Mass, but after the consecration, they become the real flesh and blood of Christ.^{lxi} This understanding is rooted in the words of Christ at the Last Supper, "This is my body... this is my blood," and in John 6:53-56, where Jesus emphasises eating His flesh and drinking His blood as necessary for eternal life. The Holy Communion, in Catholic theology, serves multiple functions:

1. As a memorial (*anamnesis*) of Christ's sacrifice.
2. As a re-presentation (not a repetition) of the one sacrifice of Calvary.
3. As a means of sanctifying grace and deepening union with Christ and the Church.
4. As a pledge of future glory in the eschatological banquet.^{lxii}

Recent theological reflections emphasise the Holy Communion's role in fostering social justice and communal reconciliation, seeing the table as a locus of unity across divisions.^{lxiii} Holy Communion is given during Mass and is only available to Catholics who have been baptised and are in a state of grace, meaning they are not guilty of mortal sin. Catholics must fast for at least an hour and have confessed any substantial sins through the Sacrament of Reconciliation before they can receive Communion.^{lxiv} Diocesan bishops in Nigeria frequently stress the importance of appropriate sacramental preparation and catechesis. In 2021 and 2023, for instance, the Catholic Bishops' Conference of Nigeria (CBCN) sent pastoral letters stressing the importance of rigorous adherence to canonical principles, particularly in light of the growing popularity of charismatic influences and syncretistic rituals.^{lxv}

Children typically receive First Holy Communion after several years of catechesis, usually around age nine, following a careful period of preparation involving parents and parish catechists. The administration is highly regulated:

1. Only priests and deacons may consecrate.
2. The faithful receive either on the tongue or in the hand, depending on local customs.
3. Lay extraordinary ministers may assist in distribution under the priest's supervision.

Catechesis is central to Eucharistic practice in the Catholic Church. Nigerian Catholic dioceses uphold demanding preparation programmes for First Holy Communion candidates. These include instruction on:

1. The Real Presence.
2. The necessity of grace and confession.
3. The spiritual effects of the sacrament.
4. Proper dispositions and gestures during Mass.^{lxvi}

Moreover, adult catechesis through programmes like RCIA (Rite of Christian Initiation of Adults) ensures that converts are properly formed before full participation in the Eucharistic life of the Church. The 2023 Abuja Archdiocese Catechetical Directory emphasises that “participation in the Holy Communion is both a privilege and a responsibility requiring continual formation in faith, morality, and ecclesial communion”.^{lxvii} The Catholic Church in Nigeria has largely maintained doctrinal and disciplinary integrity regarding the Holy Communion. The strict requirement of being in a state of grace before reception is thoroughly taught, and there is a strong culture of confession before major feasts or communal Masses. However, challenges continue:

1. **Cultural syncretism:** In certain rural and semi-urban communities, some Catholics continue to integrate local spiritual practices, sometimes approaching the Holy Communion as a form of protective charm or source of automatic blessings rather than as a covenantal sacrament requiring moral conversion.^{lxviii}
2. **Mass gatherings and anniversaries:** During large liturgical celebrations (e.g., Marian pilgrimages or diocesan anniversaries), the sheer size of congregations can make individual pastoral oversight difficult. Observers note that some individuals, including erstwhile Catholics and even non-Catholics, may sometimes receive Communion without proper disposition.^{lxix}
3. **Charismatic influence:** The growth of Catholic Charismatic Renewal has introduced a stronger emphasis on immediate spiritual benefits, healing, and empowerment through the Holy Communion. While these aspects are not inherently unorthodox, they can sometimes overshadow the sacrificial and communal dimensions if not properly balanced.^{lxx}

Despite these challenges, the Church’s emphasis on doctrinal instructions, sacramental confession, and canonical regulations remains resilient and serves as a model of Holy

Communion discipline among Nigerian Christian denominations. A profound dedication to theology with roots in ancient tradition and canonical rigour is demonstrated by the Catholic Church in Nigeria. Its focus and discipline stand in stark contrast to the more practical and experiential practices observed in Pentecostal churches, despite significant pastoral and social realities.

The Apostolic Faith Church

The Apostolic Faith was founded by a woman named Reverend Florence Louise Crawford.^{lxxi} Reverend Crawford was born into an atheist family; she was never taken to church nor taught to pray or read the Bible. Rather, she grew up in an atmosphere where the existence of God was denied.^{lxxii} Florence L. Crawford loved the pleasures of life before her conversion, but deep down in her heart was a yearning for God. While she was going about enjoying herself one night, God encountered her. As she was dancing in a ballroom one night, God called her subtly, saying, “Daughter, give me your heart.”^{lxxiii} This led her to seek God until she prayed through to salvation and was converted. Her life was immediately transformed, and her interests changed completely. Crawford had an ardent passion for the salvation of souls and did a lot to be a blessing to others.^{lxxiv}

The Azusa Street Revival in Los Angeles (1906-1909), which sparked the worldwide Pentecostal movement, is where the Apostolic Faith Church originated.^{lxxv} After George Hughes and a group of American missionaries visited Nigeria in 1944 and set up the first mission station there, the church formally launched its Nigerian chapter.^{lxxvi} Around this time, the man who was instrumental in the introduction and establishment of the Apostolic Faith work in Nigeria, Timothy Gbadebo Oshokoya, received some Apostolic Faith tracts through Evangelist Odutola. Oshokoya read those tracts and later came across additional literature in the hands of Evangelist Joseph Ayo Babalola, one of the founders of the Christ Apostolic Church worldwide.^{lxxvii}

In 1944, he was led by the Holy Spirit to organise a prayer group. Later on, the group added Bible study (mainly reading tracts received from Portland) in their meetings. On October 14, 1944, in the afternoon, a special meeting was held by Timothy Oshokoya, D. T. Robbins, and Lucas Obakoya.^{lxxviii} A thorough comparison of the teachings of the Apostolic Faith was made with those of the other Pentecostal groups. The result led them to adopt the doctrines of the Apostolic Faith Mission, and this decision was communicated to the Portland Headquarters.^{lxxix} Thus, the Apostolic Faith began as an organisation in Nigeria.

The movement first gained traction by emphasising holiness, Spirit baptism, and a clear detachment from worldliness. These elements resonated with conservative indigenous Christian desires for spiritual authenticity and purity.^{lxxx} It began in Lagos and quickly expanded throughout Nigeria, particularly the South West and South East, creating a network of congregations bound together by an uncompromising standard of practice and a centralised system of leadership. Today, the Apostolic Faith Church in Nigeria is noted for its conservative theology, strong musical ministry, and commitment to traditional Pentecostal holiness standards.^{lxxxi}

The Apostolic Faith Church maintains a traditional Pentecostal theology that places a great focus on individual salvation, sanctification (as a second, unmistakable act of grace), and Holy Spirit baptism, demonstrated by speaking in tongues.^{lxxxii} According to the church's symbolic memorialist view of Holy Communion, the elements symbolise but do not become the body and blood of Christ (rejecting transubstantiation and consubstantiation).^{lxxxiii} The Communion is primarily seen as:

1. A memorial of Christ's atoning sacrifice.
2. An act of obedience to Christ's command ("Do this in remembrance of me," Luke 22:19).
3. A communal reaffirmation of unity among believers.
4. A solemn occasion for self-examination and renewed commitment to holy living.

The Apostolic Faith Church explicitly teaches that Communion should only be partaken by those who are saved, sanctified, and living victoriously over sin, emphasising Paul’s warnings in 1 Corinthians 11:27-29 about unworthy participation.^{lxxxiv} While several other denominations observe Holy Communion on regular “Communion Sundays,” the Apostolic Faith Church in Nigeria does not. Instead, it is mainly administered at the annual camp meeting, which is the church’s retreat and spiritual rejuvenation programme that takes place at Faith City, Igbesa, Ogun State, as well as regional campgrounds around Nigeria.^{lxxxv} With its historical roots in American Holiness organisations, the camp meetings, which usually take place once a year, bring Christians together for intense revival services, Bible lessons, and congregational worship.^{lxxxvi}

During these camp meetings, Holy Communion is typically conducted on one of the final evenings, often regarded as a high point of the entire gathering. The meals prepared remain unleavened bread and unfermented juice, symbolising purity and freedom from sin. Key features of administration include:

1. Strict spiritual preparation: Participants are required to engage in personal and corporate prayer, self-examination, and restitution before partaking.^{lxxxvii}
2. Emphasis on reconciliation: Church leaders explicitly urge all participants to ensure they have reconciled any broken relationships and corrected any moral failings.
3. Centralised oversight: The service is led by ordained ministers, and strict control is maintained to ensure reverence and doctrinal fidelity.

In some states, regional or state-level camp meetings are also organised annually, and they equally include a Holy Communion service modelled after the national camp meeting at Igbesa. This structure underscores the Apostolic Faith Church’s solid emphasis on corporate holiness, unity, and spiritual renewal as prerequisites for Last Supper participation.^{lxxxviii} Catechesis in the Apostolic Faith Church is thorough and conservative. Prospective communicants go through systematic doctrinal teachings covering:

1. The meaning and significance of the Lord’s Supper.
2. The necessity of being “saved” and living a sanctified life.

3. The importance of restitution and forgiveness as prerequisites for participation.

Children and new converts are not allowed to participate until they have demonstrated a consistent spiritual life and completed catechetical instruction.^{lxxxix} Apostolic Faith publications and local Bible teachings consistently emphasise the doctrine of spiritual readiness and covenantal purity as the foundation for Holy Communion participation.

Practical difficulties still exist even though the Apostolic Faith Church in Nigeria upholds a strict doctrinal and disciplinary framework around Holy Communion. Rather than guiding struggling believers towards grace and restoration, the strict holiness requirement can occasionally foster an exclusivist culture by deterring individuals from approaching the table out of fear of condemnation.^{xc} The rigorous exclusion of non-sanctified or non-reconciled members can cause social tension in rural Nigerian settings where community cohesion is crucial. In some cases, this pushes people to pretend to be spiritually prepared to avoid public humiliation, ironically undermining the very integrity the system is meant to protect.^{xc1}

The communal and eschatological aspects of the Holy Communion (as a symbol of ecclesial unity and a preview of the heavenly banquet) are given relatively less prominence than the emphasis on individual holiness. This has led some academics to contend that, despite having a scriptural foundation, the Apostolic Faith's focus on purity may unintentionally limit the sacrament's expansive theological possibilities.^{xcii} Despite being meant to preserve holiness, the heavy emphasis on sanctification and worthiness may encourage a performance-based spirituality as opposed to a covenantal, grace-centred method of discipleship.^{xciii} A counter-witness to the increasingly practical and experienced Eucharistic methods in contemporary Pentecostalism, the Apostolic Faith Church stands out among Nigerian churches despite these difficulties for its persistent devotion to the moral and spiritual demands of the Holy Communion.

Theology and Ethics Implications of Holy Communion to the Modern Church in Nigeria

Paul's admonition in 1 Corinthians 11:27-29 provides a vital theological and ethical framework for understanding Holy Communion in the life of the church. The apostle challenges a misinterpretation of the Lord's Supper that compromised Christ's sacrifice and the unity of His body, in addition to liturgical abuse. The term "whoever eats the bread or drinks the cup of the Lord in an unworthy manner" (v. 27) refers not to personal moral purity, but to a method of participation that contradicts the fundamental essence of the meal. This includes disrespect for less fortunate believers, social division, and selfishness in Corinth (1 Corinthians 11:20-22). To partake "unworthily" consequently meant approaching the table without acknowledging its covenantal, communal, and Christ-centred importance.

Paul's exhortation to self-examination (v. 28) is a call to ethical discernment regarding the body of Christ rather than merely a call for introspection. "Discerning the body" (v. 29) includes identifying both the sacrificial body of Christ offered in death and the ecclesial body produced by believers who participate in the one bread (cf. 1 Corinthians 10:16-17). If this is not done, there will be *κρίμα* (judgement), which Paul defines as divine discipline meant to bring holiness back to the society (vv. 30-32). Therefore, Holy Communion is a covenantal act that declares Christ's death, demands communal reconciliation, and leads Christians into a life marked by the cross rather than merely a ritual for personal gain.

These exegetical observations have profound implications for the modern-day church in Nigeria. To begin with, the Holy Communion should be seen as a major involvement in the self-giving sacrifice of Christ and not as a way of receiving material or therapeutic reward. Although healing and the providence of God are still Christian beliefs, the Lord's Supper focuses on remembering, preaching, and restating the covenants. A teaching that majorly offers

Communion as an object of a miracle portends to wipe out its biblical meaning and promotes a transactional spirituality.

Secondly, the seriousness of the participation in terms of ethics is noted through Paul's emphasis on self-examination. Practices that promote repentance, reconciliation, and moral accountability should be developed in churches before going to the table. This necessitates no perfection, only a willingness to forsake the sin and get restored relationships in the body of Christ. In cases where social pressures, social expectations, or fear of being humiliated force individuals to attend without being prepared spiritually, the church should give pastoral instruction that confirms abstinence, whereby it is a way of worshipping but not as a sign of failure.

Thirdly, seeing the body challenges the church against any kind of division, exclusion, and inequality that works against the unity represented in the one bread. By means of the Communion table, the community should become a conspicuous marker of reconciliation in situations where economic inequality, ethnic conflict, or age imbalance exists. Isolated practices of the meal that are seen in individualistic expectations of blessing without being concerned with the well-being of fellow intercessors are not in line with the way Paul envisioned it.

Lastly, Paul's teachings emphasise the necessity of ongoing theological instruction and pastoral supervision during Holy Communion services. Congregations can transition from casual familiarity and ceremonial terror to informed, reverent participation with clear instruction on the significance of the Lord's Supper, its relationship to Christ's death, and its ethical requirements. In this way, Holy Communion may restore its role as a formative practice that forms Christians into a community defined by thankfulness, holiness, unity, and hope in the Lord's return. In reference to Jesus' practice during His earthly ministry, He only fed the multitudes with bread but never served them the Holy Communion. It was given only to the

disciples. Disciples are those who are true followers of Christ, that is, born-again believers. This action presupposes that it is a covenant meal, which should not be taken by just anybody or the multitude, but only by people who have entered into a covenant relationship with Jesus. Many Pentecostal churches assume that all the members of their congregation are born again, so they can partake in the Holy Communion, but the Mainline churches restrict the communion to only a few who are genuinely worthy to take it at a time. They see it as a meal of renewing a covenant with Jesus every time it is taken.

Conclusion

In conclusion, this article points to the urgent theological and ethical need for Nigerian churches to regain a balanced Holy Communion theology that upholds sacramental grace, covenantal recall, and ethical accountability. The Holy Communion is not merely a site of spiritual transaction but a communal encounter that calls believers into a transformative relationship with God and with one another.^{xciv} Therefore, churches ought to oppose both hyper-exclusivism and sacramental commercialisation. Rather, Holy Communion practice should foster forgiveness, repentance, and fellowship among the community, reflecting the church's status as Christ's body. The emphasis should not be more on both physical and spiritual benefits, but also on the consequences of taking it unworthily. Moreover, it is essential to improve pastoral supervision and catechesis. Teaching must incorporate profound theological reflection on the repercussions of unworthy participation, communal reconciliation, and leading a life worthy of the calling, in addition to highlighting benefits (healing, breakthroughs, protection, etc.).^{xcv} Lastly, there is a crucial ethical requirement to oppose social influences that encourage people to participate in unworthy activities, such as cultural obligation or fear of embarrassment. Church leaders should instead create an environment where, when required, abstention is seen as a sign of integrity rather than a sign of failure.

Endnote

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