

# 'For he who eats and drinks in an unworthy manner, eats and drinks judgment to himself': Interpreting 1 Corinthians 11:27–30 in light of the denial and avoidance of the Holy Communion in some churches in Nigeria

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Christians all over the world celebrate the Eucharist as an important aspect of their faith. Arising from Paul's warning in 1 Corinthians 11:27–30 that persons who eat the Lord's Supper unworthily bring judgment upon themselves, some churches in Nigeria restrict the Communion to supposedly holy members. This article examined the text with a view to appraising this attitude towards the Communion. It applied the historical exegesis and the analytical approach. The article found that the restriction of the Eucharist to selected members of the congregation is counter-productive and self-defeating in that many Christians are denied the opportunity to partake of it. Paul's view of judgment upon participants derived from his Jewish perception in which affliction was always seen as divine punishment. Furthermore, at its inception the celebration of the Communion does not reflect the idea that it was meant for only holy people. In view of this, and the fact that the Jewish perception need not apply in the modern and scientific world, the work concluded that the mainline churches in Nigeria have to review their attitude towards the Communion such that all Christians are encouraged to participate in it. While laying emphasis on reverent and loving behaviour at the Lord's Table, the idea of the Communion causing illness and death should be completely jettisoned.

**Contribution:** This article is a contribution to New Testament Theology and Christian ethics. The proposal to make the Eucharist more accommodating is significant for congregational harmony in the church in Nigeria.

**Keywords:** Eucharist; denial of Holy Communion; sickness and death; the Corinthian church; the church in Nigeria.

## Introduction

Holy Communion is the term that is popularly applied to the Christian practice of meal sharing in fellowship, instituted by Jesus with his disciples. The term is not found in the Bible, but seems to have been adapted from the Greek *κοινωνία* [communion], which as used in 1 Corinthians 10:16–17 connotes 'fellowship', 'friendship' or 'participation' 'in the body and blood of Christ by sharing the bread and the cup of blessing' (Patte 2010, cited in Ngcobo 2020:4). In I Corinthians 11:20, Paul refers to the meal that was shared among members of the Corinthian church as 'The Lord's Supper' [κυριακον δειπνον]. However, in the *Didache* (the teaching of the Apostles which goes back to the first century CE [Nmah 2013:121]), the practice of meal sharing in the early church came to be known frequently as 'Eucharist' [ευχαριστια], which means 'a giving of thanks' (Coutsoumpos 1996:201). The term 'Eucharist', therefore, denotes thanksgiving, possibly 'because at its institution Christ gave thanks' (Nmah 2013:121). All over Christendom, the Holy Communion is celebrated in remembrance of the death of Jesus, thus symbolising 'the union of Christ with the faithful' (Ottuh & Erabor 2016:243). Baldovin (2011:2) stated that for a great number of 'Christians, the Eucharist is one of the most important and vital aspects of the faith'. In Nigeria, most denominations hold the service of the Holy Communion at varied intervals. The concern of this article, however, has to do with the denial and avoidance of the service by Christians in some Nigerian churches. In such churches, the Holy Communion is officially looked upon as an event only for 'holy' Christians (Patte 2010:262; Von Allmen 1969:61). Hence, whenever it is celebrated, only a highly reduced percentage of the congregation partakes in it while the majority depart

(Ngcobo 2020:2). This attitude to the Lord's Supper apparently derives from Paul's warning in 1 Corinthians 11, especially verses 27–30, that persons who partake in the event unworthily bring judgement upon themselves in terms of illness and death. The aim of this article is to examine this text and apply it to the attitudes of denial and avoidance of the Eucharist as witnessed in some churches in Nigeria. Specifically, it attempts to find out any possible correlation between the manner in which the Lord's Supper was celebrated at Corinth and the supposed sickness and death of some of the participants in that church. The finding here will be utilised to appraise the attitudes of denial and avoidance of the Communion in Nigeria. The article adopts the historical exegesis for the study of the text and the analytical approach for the discussion of the denial and avoidance of the Holy Communion in Nigeria. The article begins with the discussion of the biblical origin of the Communion. From there, it examines its denial and avoidance in some churches in Nigeria. Finally, the article undertakes an exegesis of 1 Corinthians 11:27–30.

## The biblical origin of the Holy Communion

The origin of the Holy Communion is usually traced to the last meal that Jesus had with his disciples the night preceding his arrest. Its origin is associated with this event particularly by virtue of Jesus' command to his disciples to celebrate it in remembrance of him (Ottuh & Erabor 2016:243; cf. Mt 6:17–19; Mk 14:12–14; Lk 22:7–17). The background for the Last Supper was the Jewish Passover (Keener 1993:477; Routledge 2002:206), the festival that commemorated the deliverance of the Israelites from the Egyptian bondage. Jesus thus identified himself with the Passover, but then introduced 'a wholly new significance' (Routledge 2002:206) in that the bread and the wine now represent his body and blood, respectively, in the scheme of 'the new and better deliverance' he would bring to his people (Routledge 2002:217).

The book of the Acts of the Apostles indicates the practice of the Eucharist after Jesus. After the disciples had received the gift of the Holy Spirit as promised by Jesus, they came together in Jerusalem as a Christian community, and among its doctrines was the breaking of bread, along with baptism and prayers (Ac 2:42). As the church grew, the celebration of the Lord's Supper most likely became part of the order of the Sunday worship service (Ac 20:7). In the apostolic church, the most obvious 'characteristic feature of the Eucharist ... was its unifying aspect' (Nmah 2013:121). Hence, as will be seen later, when the Christians at Corinth seemed to have forgotten this, Paul had to remind them that 'genuine mutual love was the key note of the Eucharist' (p. 121; cf. 1 Cor 11:23–27). Across the ages in Christendom, the Eucharist has become an event regularly celebrated in obedience to Jesus' command to do it in remembrance of him. In Nigeria, most denominations have the Communion Service among their doctrines, even though the service is observed in varied ways according to its details. However, the next section focuses

mainly on the denial and avoidance of the Communion in Nigeria, particularly in the mainline churches.

## The denial and avoidance of the Holy Communion in Nigeria

As mentioned earlier, most denominations in Nigeria celebrate the Lord's Supper. They all teach that the Eucharist was instituted by Jesus, and all believers 'might partake thereof regularly till He come' (Bitrus 2016:292). Hence, the Communion is not only clearly enumerated in the articles of faith of most churches but also is an integral part of their worship services (Bitrus 2016:292). The time for the celebration of the Eucharist varies from church to church. In Nigeria, as in other parts of the world, in the Catholic Church, the Communion is part of every Sunday worship service (Baldovin 2011:2). In the same vein, the Church of Nigeria (Anglican Communion) (n.d.) states in its liturgy that 'the Eucharist should be celebrated at least every Sunday and on Holy Days' (online). In many local churches of the Evangelical Church Winning All (ECWA<sup>1</sup>), the Communion is observed once every month. Mbamalu (2015:6) stated that in some Pentecostal churches, 'the Lord's Supper is observed every Sunday evening'. Bishop Oyedepo of Living Faith Church (a.k.a. Winners' Chapel), a neo-Pentecostal church, recommends the Holy Communion to be 'taken as often as possible' (Oyedepo 2006:91). The order of service in the Communion celebration is not uniform across the denominations, but in many places it involves hymn singing, reading of relevant portions of the Bible, especially the New Testament, prayer for the 'sanctification of bread and wine; breaking, serving and eating bread, serving and drinking of wine', etc. (Mbamalu 2015:6).

The denial and avoidance of the Communion are witnessed mostly in the mainline churches. Conversely, in the Pentecostal and neo-Pentecostal denominations:

[A]ttitude toward the Lord's Supper is much more flexible and inclusive than [in] the mainline churches. The members virtually have unrestricted access to the Lord's Supper as long as they are born again. (Bitrus 2016:298)

According to Nmah (2013:132), Pentecostal churches practise what is known as open or inclusive communion, that is, one in which 'every adult Christian partakes ... irrespective of denomination'. Open or inclusive communion is the opposite of the practice that denies communion to persons who are 'not members of one particular denomination' (p. 132). Churches that practise closed or exclusive communion do so in order not to serve it to persons who may not understand its meaning or do 'not agree with the doctrine of the church' (p. 132). Pentecostal denominations avoid the likelihood of serving the Communion to wrong persons by explaining in detail what participation in the Lord's Supper means so that no one partakes in it 'in a manner that will cause condemnation upon oneself' (p. 133). For instance, in some Cherubim and Seraphim (C&S) churches, at the opening of the Communion

1.1 belong to ECWA.

Service the officiating elder would announce that ‘Those who are conscious of their sins or who have quarrel with their neighbours should now repent and settle with them before venturing to come to the Communion Service’ (Omoyajowo 1982, cited in Nmah 2013:130). In fact, rather than restrict the Communion to certain ‘holy’ members of the church, in some neo-Pentecostals the Eucharist is embedded in the prosperity teaching such that most members seek to participate (Bitrus 2016:299). For instance, Oyedepo (2002:40) taught that if one takes the Communion with the right perspective, one should ‘expect to be strong, healthy and to fulfil the number of your days’. Upon eating the bread and drinking the wine of the Lord’s Supper, ‘every zero sperm count, dead womb, dead ovaries, whatever is called dead will be quickened back to life by the power in the blood contained in this miracle meal’. With this miraculous interpretation of the Communion, the fear of judgment associated with the Eucharist in the mainline churches recedes to the background, which accounts for the ‘massive participation in communion in many neo-Pentecostal faith communities’ (Bitrus 2016:299).

As mentioned earlier, it is in the mission-oriented churches that the denial and avoidance of the Eucharist are mostly seen.<sup>2</sup> For instance, in the Lutheran Church:

Prior to partaking of communion, members must meet the condition that they be baptized standing members of the church. They also must be in a monogamous marital relationship, or they must be members of a monogamous family. Again, their membership card must be up to date. Those in plural marital relationships and families are excluded from the Lord’s Supper. (Bitrus 2016:300)

Hence, Von Allmen (1969:61) asserted that in many denominations, the Eucharist is a ‘meal of the baptised’ (cf. Patte 2010:262). In the Anglican Communion (n.d.), it is restricted to ‘every confirmed person’ (online). Ekundayo (2015:48) stated that in this church, ‘participation in Eucharist is based on baptism and confirmation rites’. Apart from these official rules, in some very strict churches, the Communion is limited to the ‘holier’ members such that, for instance, ‘not everyone who has been baptised is allowed to partake in the meal’ (Ngcobo 2020:4). Thus, the modality employed by the mainline churches, more than their official tenets, which really scares members away from the Communion, is the pronouncement in 1 Corinthians 11, especially verses 27–30, to the effect that persons ‘who eat the body and drink the blood unworthily eat and drink judgment and will be condemned’ (Bitrus 2016:300). Most people are really scared as the judgement is often thought of in terms of illness and death, as read in the text. Writing about the Lutheran Church, Bitrus (2016) captures this fact succinctly when he states that:

The dominant perception of the Lord’s Supper among Nigerian Christians is that unworthy partaking of the communion brings judgment. The fear that the Lord’s Supper condemns to death whomever takes it unworthily has caused many to steer clear of communion.... [P]erhaps less than half of those who attend

<sup>2</sup>It is important to note that in actual sense during each Communion Service, besides reading out the rules to the congregation, hardly does anyone practically ensure that every participant qualify according to the regulations. At least, this is what happens in most local branches of ECWA.

worship partake of communion. The rest of the members vanish. In fact, even those who muster the courage to stay back for the Lord’s Supper often commune with fear and trembling. (p. 300)

Thus, the fear of sickness or death arising from eating the Communion unworthily scares many Nigerian Christians away from it. In some churches, for instance, sometimes in ECWA, at the beginning of the Communion Service, the minister in charge spells out the qualifications for participating in it, all of which suggest holiness on the part of the partakers. Hence, the perception that the congregation usually has of the solemn service is that some sort of sinless people are qualified to participate in the Lord’s Supper. In view of this perception, even before the qualifications are spelt out, many who consider themselves unholy have left. It is important to note that the leadership of the church apparently accepts this understanding of the Eucharist, as the emphasis is always on the need for partakers to examine themselves, and people are seldom restrained from avoiding it. That is why we can talk not only of avoidance of the Communion but also of its denial to people by the churches concerned. In the next section this article examines 1 Corinthians 11:27–30 with a view to appraising the attitudes of denial and avoidance of the Eucharist in Nigeria.

## Eating and drinking judgement on oneself: An exegesis of 1 Corinthians 11:27–30<sup>3</sup>

One major characteristic feature of the church at Corinth was that it was beset with varied controversies, such as ‘factionalism and internal community relations, sexual ethics and relations with people outside the church’ (Carter & Levine 2013, cited in Ademiluka 2019:5; cf. 1 Cor 7:1, 8:1, 12:1; 16:1). It appears that the manner in which the Lord’s Supper was celebrated in that church reflected the divisions among the members. As Musekiwa (n.d.) puts it, 1 Corinthians 11:17–34 indicates that ‘the church had issues in the way they observed the Lord’s Supper’ (online) and sought Paul’s guidance on it in a letter they had written to him. From verses 20–21 and 33, it can be deduced that the core of the problem was that the Eucharist was not being eaten communally. Rather, it is ‘as if each individual had eaten independently of the others’ (Theissen 1982:147); each eating according to what he or she owned, such that while some ate to their fill and got drunk, others remained hungry. That is why in verse 20 Paul says that ‘their divisions reflect even in the way they ate’ the Lord’s Supper (Musekiwa n.d.:online). For Paul, such conduct was indicative of insensitivity towards one another and devoid of brotherly love, and therefore not worthy of his commendation. Based on verse 21, ‘For in eating each one goes ahead with his own meal’, Coutsoumpos (1996:202) conjectured that at Corinth, the Lord’s Supper celebration comprised two sections, namely ‘a

<sup>3</sup>Verses 27–30 deal with the issues of eating and drinking in an unworthy manner, the need for participants to examine themselves before eating the Holy Communion and judgement on those who participate unworthily. However, these issues cannot be thoroughly dealt with without a proper understanding of the preceding verses. Hence, the exegesis has to begin from verse 20.

collective meal, taken for the purpose of nourishment ... followed by a solemn service of the Eucharist meal'. The first meal was the individual food made beforehand and would differ in quantity and quality. This means that the rich brought plenty of food and wine and were possibly getting drunk, whereas the poor brought little and 'suffered embarrassment as well' (Austin 2021:online). Coutsoumpos (1996:202; cf. Marshall 1980:109) explained that:

The wealthy brought so much food and drink that they could indulge in gluttony and drunkenness. The poor who came later, however, had little or nothing to bring, with the result that some of them went hungry. (p. 202)

Moreover, some members would begin to eat ahead of the others and before the commencement of Lord's Supper proper (Coutsoumpos 1996:204; cf. v. 21). It is, therefore, correct to say that the problem with the Holy Communion in the church at Corinth 'obviously arose from social disagreement within the congregation' (p. 202).

That the problem with the Eucharist at Corinth arose from social stratification means that the service held there conformed in some ways to the Graeco-Roman culture of common meal. It is agreed among many scholars that:

[T]here was a common meal tradition throughout the Greco-Roman Mediterranean that lay at the basis of all active meals, whether they be gentile, Jewish, or Christian. For example, Jews had Passover meals, and other festive meals to symbolize their relationship with Yahweh ... Mystery cults also gathered for a common meal in [which] special banquets were arranged as part of the initiation ceremony. No matter what purpose one gathered for a common meal ... the meal followed the same basic form and customs of the banquet regardless of the group, occasion or setting, and thus becoming a social institution in the Greco-Roman world. (Philip 2019:2)

Alikin (2009:5) mentioned periodical gathering for supper and drinking as the main feature of 'virtually all religious voluntary associations' in the Graeco-Roman society. Many contend that the phrasing of 1 Corinthians 11:23–25, in which the cup of the wine comes after the supper (Grk. *δειπνον*), indicates that the Lord's Supper, as observed at Corinth, followed the three-step progression of the common meal tradition, that is:

[T]he Eucharistic bread is blessed and broken. Then, a nourishing dinner takes place. Finally, the dinner ends with the blessing of the cup and the drinking from it ... [T]his follows Greek dinner custom, in which both the meal table of the *δειπνον* and the second table of the *symposium* began with an invocation to the gods. (Collier 2009:57)

Similarly, Smith (2003) attested that the Lord's Supper at Corinth presents the regular aspects a Graeco-Roman banquet, which included benediction over the food, as seen in the bread, the *δειπνον* as mentioned in 1 Corinthians 11:25 and a 'benediction over the wine marking the transition from *δειπνον* to *symposium*' (cited in Collier 2009:58). Thus, the meal practices of the early church most likely followed closely 'the dining practices of the Hellenistic world' (p. 58).

It may, therefore, be correct to conclude that the Graeco-Roman 'banquet form provides the backdrop for [the early Christian] tradition' (Smith 2003:188). In that society, people were graded according to their social status, and this social stratification reflected in the common meal tradition. Philip (2019:3) opined that meals 'functioned as a social symbol which located the rank of an individual in a social ladder'. Discrimination was reflected in the position one occupied at a banquet and in the quality and quantity of the food served. Stambaugh and Balch (1986) stated that:

The dinner parties segregated people as per their social ranking. At meals, whether private dinner practice to which a rich patron invited some of his clients or public banquets given by an aristocrat for his fellow citizens, one's place and even what he got to eat depended strictly on his status. (p. 114)

The venue of the common meal accentuated the social stratification. Archaeological findings reveal that at Corinth, houses were of two apartments, namely a *triclinium*, that is, a small room with a dining table that would admit not more than 12 persons at a time, and an *atrium*, a larger outer room sometimes without seats (Collier 2009:61; Murphy-O'Connor 2002:178). As part of 'the social dynamics of the Greco-Roman meal tradition', guests of higher status were seated around the dining table in the *triclinium*, while the rest gathered in the *atrium* (Philip 2019:8). In plain view of this inner room, guests in the *atrium* were 'served inferior food and inferior wine' (Keener 1993:477).

From the foregoing, for a number of factors, it is highly possible that at Corinth, the participants in the Lord's Supper misconstrued it as the usual common meal. In the first place, as noted earlier, cultic meals were part of worship in the Graeco-Roman world. It is, therefore, possible that 'in the early church the Lord's Supper was most likely eaten as, or in conjunction with, such a meal' (Fee 1987, cited in Philip 2019:6). As expressed by Keener (1993:477), for the Corinthian congregation the Eucharist was understood 'as a festal banquet such as they knew from Greek ... meetings [or] religious associations'. Therefore, Philip (2019:6) plausibly suggested that the adoption of the common 'meal tradition created social tension within the church' at Corinth. Moreover, 'in the mid-first century, Christians did not have a separate building [or] temple' (Philip 2019:8) for their meetings, and hence, the Church at Corinth must be gathering in the homes of 'well-to-do patrons' (1993:477), that is, the wealthiest members of that congregation (Philip 2019:8). This fact is buttressed by Thiselton (2000:856) when he stated that the meal at Corinth was 'more like a patron-client meal', akin to what was common in ancient Rome. In that circumstance, the occurrence at that church was possibly 'an elitism' (Collier 2009:61). It was a situation in which the host would gather with 'his closest friends and guests of the highest rank in the *triclinium* while the rest of the church ate in the *atrium*' (p. 61). Similarly, Philip (2019:8) suggested that the congregation most likely met in two sections of the house 'simultaneously to have the Lord's Supper as per the conventions of the day'. As Coutsoumpos (1996:204) puts it, 'the first-class believers, [perhaps] the host's closest friends,

were invited into the *triclinium*, while the others stayed in the *atrium*. In other words, church members were seated according to their social status. Nonetheless, the atmosphere which caused the tension that warranted Paul's remarks in verses 20–22 was not limited to the discrimination in the space provided because Coutsoumpos (1996:205) adds that 'different types of food [were served] to different categories of guests [as] was the popular Roman custom' (cf. Collier 2009:61). Theissen (1982) may therefore be right when he stated that the conflicts over meal at the Corinthian church arose from the socio-economic realities of the time, confirming that 'the majority of the members come from lower classes [while] a few ... come from upper classes' (cited in Philip 2019:6). As expressed by Keener (1993:477), some members were 'treated more honourably than others at the meal' in a way that reflected the worldly status values. In Surburg's (2006:18) summary, the problem at the church in Corinth had to do with meal behaviour involving where the different categories of members ate, 'what they ate, and how much they ate'.

In verses 24–26, Paul contrasts the Lord's Supper with the common meal tradition. Unlike the latter, the Lord's Supper is of immense spiritual significance in that it is meant to commemorate the sacrificial death of Jesus, and the Corinthian Christians should celebrate it accordingly, that is, they should stop participating in it in an unworthy manner (v.27). The Greek word which most English translations render as 'unworthy' is *ἀναξίως*. According to grammarians, 'ἀναξίως is the opposite of *αξιός*' (Thiselton 2000:889). Etymologically, *αξιός* 'refers to the drawing up of weights and thus signifies [the idea of] one side of the scales rising high, the other dropping low' (Austin 2021:online). It thus has the connotation of 'bringing into balance' or 'being appropriate' (Austin 2021:online; cf. 1 Cor 16:4). The meaning of *ἀναξίως* can be further illustrated with Luke 15:19 where the prodigal son says, 'I am no longer *αξιός* to be called your son'. Most English versions translate *αξιός* here as 'worthy' but Today's English Version (TEV) renders it as 'fit'. Hence, *ἀναξίως* means 'unfit' or 'unworthy' (Thiselton 2000:889). Austin (2021) noted that *ἀναξίως* is an adverb, which describes doing things 'in a careless [or] an improper manner' (online). It is not an adjective qualifying the condition of the participants in the communion, 'but an adverb describing the manner in which one partakes' of it (Krell 2010:online). As Philip (2019:10) puts it, *ἀναξίως* does not signify the internal state of 'participants [but] the way of unfitting participation'. The King James Version (KJV) recognises that the Greek word is an adverb, hence, whereas most other versions translate *ἀναξίως* as 'in an unworthy manner' (e.g. the Revised Standard Version [RSV]), KJV translates it as 'unworthily'. Therefore, here Paul is speaking about the conduct of 'the Corinthians as they gathered together for the Lord's Supper' (Austin 2021:online). In that context, eating unworthily 'refers to the status-conscious eating that is dividing the church' (Keener 1993:477). It has to do with 'their attitudes and actions towards each other, especially the needy who have suffered acute embarrassment' (Winter 1994:1179). In the words of Arnold (n.d.), participating unworthily involved

'party strife, selfishness, drunkenness, divisions [and] alienation' (online; cf. Coutsoumpos 1996:205). As expressed by Adewuya (2007:102), by participating unworthily Paul was concerned about 'the divisiveness, the selfishness, the drunkenness that were ruining the meal'. It is important to note, then, that:

[Paul] is not saying a person must be worthy to partake, for this would exclude all Christians because all are sinners. What he is saying is that our thoughts, words and/or deeds can be such that we are judged unworthy of partaking. (Austin 2021:online)

At the end of verse 27, Paul says that those who partake of the Communion unworthily 'will be guilty of the body and blood of the Lord' (KJV). The RSV makes it clearer with the phrase 'will be guilty of profaning ...' which means that through their attitudes the Corinthians were disrespectful to the body and blood of Jesus. As expressed by MacArthur (1984), they were 'guilty of dishonoring His body and blood' (cited in Austin 2021:online).

In order not to participate in the Eucharist in an unworthy manner, Paul says participants must examine themselves beforehand (v.28). In the context of the passage, the examination centres on the 'attitudes of a party spirit and lack of compassion towards the "have-nots"' (Winter 1994:1179). Collins (1999:438) may therefore be right when he opined that the examination here is 'not so much a matter of moral introspection as of concern for the community' of the faithful. Musekiwa (n.d.) says that here Paul has in mind participants' 'attitudes and reason for eating the Lord's Supper' (online). At the Lord's Table, they must avoid behaviours that would amount to hatred for others and disrespect for the body of Jesus and the church (Musekiwa n.d.:online; Philip 2019:10). Persons who fail to examine themselves before partaking of the Communion and thereby eat unworthily profane the body of Jesus and thus bring judgement upon themselves (v.29). Judgement has, in fact, manifested in the Corinthian church in the form of weakness, illnesses and death (v.30). Paul does not attribute these problems to the food they ate, but to 'partaking in an unworthy manner' (Philip 2019:11). As discussed in the preceding section, it is on account of the fear of judgement as mentioned in this text that many Nigerian Christians avoid the Holy Communion; they have the fear that eating it might cause sickness and death. There is no debating the fact that Paul here views 'the sicknesses and deaths that happened at Corinth as God's judgment' (Musekiwa n.d.:online). Keener (1993:477) opined that Paul thus upholds the Jewish belief that 'suffering can be the Lord's discipline'. However, the view that participating in the Communion in an unworthy manner causes sickness and death is not only problematic but also not supported anywhere in the scripture. Examining oneself before eating the Communion implies that one should not eat if one is unfit in terms of character. In the context of 1 Corinthians 11, the crucial precept that was lacking was brotherly love. But Judas Iscariot betrayed Jesus, which was antithetical to love. 'Jesus knew that Judas would betray him' (Ngcobo 2020:5), yet he did not prevent him from participating in the Last

Supper (Lk 22:1–6). Judas killed himself thereafter but his death cannot be attributed to eating the Supper unworthily for Peter also denied Jesus (Jn 18:15–27) after eating the Supper and continued to live.

Perhaps, 1 Corinthians 11:29–30 is best understood in the context of Jewish perception of disease as divine judgement. There are texts where afflictions are described as divine punishment; for instance, skin disease is said to be inflicted on King Uzziah (2 Chr 26:19–20) and Gehazi (2 Ki 5–27) for certain offenses they committed. But in Leviticus 13–14, skin disease is attributed to natural events such as sex and childbirth and not to any wrong doing. Also common in the Old Testament are cases of people falling ill naturally (e.g. 2 Ki 13:14; 20:1; 23:29). The belief that afflictions are caused by God is clearly attested in the barren mother narratives where all of Sarah (Gn 16:2), Rachel (Gn 30:2) and Hannah (1 Sm 1:5) have their wombs closed by Yahweh and not for any offense committed by them (Ademiluka 2021:4). Therefore, apparently because sometimes certain ailments afflicted people as divine punishment, biblical authors came to believe that afflictions were always a punishment from God. In this way, the biblical authors ‘were simply extrapolating from the known to the unknown’ (Moss & Baden 2015, cited in Ademiluka 2021:4). Thus, in the ancient Jewish milieu, all misfortunes were explained from the religious perspective such that ‘those misfortunes we might today call “natural” [were] addressed not with medicine ... but rather by appealing to God’ (Moss & Baden 2015, cited in Ademiluka 2021:5). In attributing sickness and death among the Corinthians to their attitudes at the Holy Communion, then, Paul was possibly being influenced by his Jewish perception: the sickness and death must have come from God to punish their unworthy behaviour. However, in modern times with ‘the clear distinction between the natural and the supernatural’ (Ademiluka 2021:5), Paul’s ascription of sickness and death to people’s behaviour at the Eucharist should be viewed more critically. In other words, today Christians should not take this view seriously because other factors could be responsible for the sicknesses and deaths at the Corinthian church. Today, if some Christians fall dead after partaking in the Communion, the cause of their death would still be ascertained medically rather than concluding that they have died as a result of eating unworthily. There is the possibility of food poisoning, for instance! Therefore, while in modern Christendom the Eucharist should be celebrated in reverence and love, the fear that partaking of it unworthily causes sickness and death should be discountenanced.

## Conclusion and recommendation

In 1 Corinthians 11:27–30, reacting to the manner in which the Lord’s Supper was celebrated in the church at Corinth, Paul says that persons who partake of the event unworthily bring judgement upon themselves. Apparently some members of that church had taken ill while some had died, and the apostle attributed these problems to their unwholesome behaviour at the Lord’s Table. Some churches in Nigeria, particularly

among the mission-oriented denominations, give a literal interpretation to this passage to the extent that certain regulations are formulated by which the Holy Communion is restricted to a few members of the congregation considered to be the holy ones. Although this approach is employed to safeguard the integrity of the church:

*[It is] counter-productive and self-defeating. Rather than motivating participation ... it restricts the Lord’s Supper ... to only exclusive ‘righteous’ members. To make matters worse, it turns communion into a ‘monster’ that devours or frightens sinners, and a harmful meal that kills ... Instead of being a mercy table where grace is distributed freely, the communion table has become a judgment seat where church discipline is executed. (Bitrus 2016:300)*

This research has demonstrated that restricting the Eucharist to certain ‘holy’ members of the church is unnecessary. In the first place, if Paul’s view of judgement upon participants derived from his Jewish perception in which affliction was always seen as divine punishment, it need not apply in the modern world with the ‘biological information about’ disease and death (Ademiluka 2021:5). Moreover, at its inception, the Communion celebration does not reflect the idea that it was meant for holy people. Otherwise, some of the disciples of Jesus would have been disqualified. Therefore, the mainline churches in Nigeria have to review their attitude to the Eucharist such that all Christians are encouraged to participate in it anywhere anytime. That is to say that all restrictions relating to membership of particular denominations, baptism, confirmation or form of marriage should be removed. The church ought to emphasise the need to celebrate the Eucharist in reverent and loving character, but should disabuse the minds of its members of the fear of illness and death arising from eating the Holy Communion.

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S.O.A. is the sole author of this article.

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