



Eucharist

Eduqas A level R.S. G1A Christianity Theme 4B

Key Concepts:

- The Eucharist is important for Christians simply because it was **commanded** by Jesus (Matthew 26:26-29, I Corinthians 11: 23-26).
- It is also important because its name ('Eucharist' is Greek for **'thanksgiving'**) refers to the act of Jesus giving God thanks for the bread and wine.
- In this practice, Christians give thanks for forgiveness through Jesus' sacrifice.
- The Eucharist serves several **functions** across denominations:
 - (i) it reminds participants of God's saving acts including the Passover and Jesus' sacrifice
 - (ii) it orients them to a positive future: the coming of Jesus (I Cor 11:26)
 - (iii) it affirms individual faith as a personal reminder of salvation and
 - (iv) strengthens community as it is practiced in the Church
 - (v) it is a source/reminder of rich **symbolism**: bread of life, the Passover, manna, etc.
- For Roman Catholics the Eucharist is an outward sign of an inward grace.
- Catholic theology views the eucharist in terms of **transubstantiation**: the bread and wine are transformed into the body and blood of Christ as a result of their priestly consecration - affirmed by the 4th Lateran Council (13th c.).
- The **'accidents'** (the outward appearance) and **'substance'** (the inner reality) of the bread and wine were thought to become the same.
- Some Catholic theologians in the 20th century felt that **Aristotelian** concepts (accidents/substance) and medieval beliefs were irrelevant for today.
- **Edward Schillebeeckx** introduced **'transignification'**, the idea that what changes at the point of consecration is the significance of the bread and wine to the believer. Also popular was the notion of **transfinalisation**, the notion that what changes in the eucharist is the final purpose of the bread and wine.
- The Catholic Church affirmed these views (1965), as long as they were seen as complementary to transubstantiation - not as replacements for it.
- Luther, with Sola Scriptura, dismissed using Greek categories of thought to define the Eucharist; he believed Jesus was present, but how was a mystery.
- Sometimes Lutherans use the term **'consubstantiation'** to indicate that Jesus is 'with' ('con') the bread and wine without a change in their substance.
- Zwingli viewed the Eucharist as merely **symbolic**. The 'is' in 'This is my body' is not to be taken literally but means 'signifies'.
- Zwingli's approach is called **memorialism** because it put the focus not on the elements themselves, but on the act of remembering.
- **'Virtualism'** in Calvinism says that though the elements remain unchanged at consecration, believers receive virtue or power through their participation.

Key quotes:

'Something can be essentially changed without its physical or biological make-up changing.' (E. Schillebeeckx)

'There are innumerable passages in Scripture where the word 'is' means signifies.' (H. Zwingli)

Key arguments/debates:

Some see Christians as more united than divided when it comes to the Eucharist, due to its common functions in communities, the symbolism it promotes and the thankfulness it induces. However, there are real disagreements over its interpretation (symbolic vs. sacramental), how often it is celebrated, and who can partake.

The theory through which one approaches this ritual does affect how centrally it is seen in the Christian life - even how the 'furniture' is arranged in churches! Those with sacramental views see it as the focus of worship - some even participate daily. Those with symbolic views may hold that preaching the 'Word' is just as effective in nurturing faith as the Eucharist. Sacramentalists usually place more importance and need for qualifications on the one serving the Eucharist; this is viewed with suspicion by some who do not hold sacramental views.

Key questions:

- Why is 'this is my body' such a controversial saying?
- Do all Christians agree on the significance if not the sacrament of the Eucharist?
- What do different terms (Lord's Supper, Communion, Mass, Breaking of Bread) reveal about theological differences between Christians?
- How is the role and understanding of the one serving the Eucharist different across Christian groups?

Key words:

Commanded | thanksgiving | functions | symbolism | sacrament | transubstantiation | accidents/substance | Aristotle Schillebeeckx | transignification | transfinalisation | consubstantiation | symbolic | memorialism | virtualism