
Do We Believe that the Communion Bread is Really the Body of Christ?

**an article for the *Cathedral Times*
by the Very Rev. Sam Candler
Dean of the Cathedral**

In almost every inquirers' class, or confirmation class, or Introduction to the Episcopal Church class, the inevitable question rises. Do Episcopalians believe that the consecrated bread at Eucharist is really the Body of Christ? Or some question like it: Do you believe in transubstantiation like [that other Church] does?

Of course, whenever anyone asks me what some other Church believes, I advise them to ask someone in that Church, because I cannot presume to speak for them. In addition, however, very few Christians today believe in the old doctrine of transubstantiation, that the consecrated bread of the Eucharist immediately becomes literal and verifiable human flesh. Really, no matter the stereotype and no matter what you learned when you were growing up as child, few Christians in any denomination believe that.

The old Reformation discussion, of five hundred years ago, pitted extreme against extreme. One side declared that when the priest at communion raised the bread and declared, "This is my Body," the bread became substantially the Body of Christ. They declared that Christ was literally present in that piece of bread. The other side declared that the bread was the symbol of a memory, that Christ was present not so much in the bread, as in the memory of the gathered community. Thus, the words of communion administration were words like, "Take this in remembrance that Christ died for thee."

In the Episcopal Church, you might observe many worshippers acting like the first extreme. We bow when the priest raises that consecrated bread, as if we think something holy is there. We are careful when we handle that piece of bread. We make the sign of the cross over our chests as we eat the bread. We make sure we treat the plates and cups with similar respect. Something holy is there.

But few of us believe that Christ is literally and verifiably in that piece of bread. Were we to place that small wafer under a microscope, it would be flour and bread, not human flesh. We believe in science.

Instead, we believe that Christ is "really" present in that piece of bread. We believe that Christ is present in the gathered memory of the believers, of course. But we also believe in the "Real Presence," not so much in either the literal presence or the symbolic presence. For us, the spiritual presence is a real presence.

Consider this: We believe that God is present everywhere, right? God is present, Christ is present, in the flowers and beauty of the earth! Those vibrant pieces of creation carry something of the energy of Christ. Well, that means God is also present even in this small piece of bread, this result of living wheat and water and heat.

When we reverence the communion bread, we are acknowledging the presence of Christ in that small piece of glorious creation. But we are also practicing. If we can acknowledge the presence of Christ in that small wafer, well, we might just be able to see God in other pieces of creation. That small piece of bread shows us that the world really is full of the glory of God.

Furthermore, the world is gradually growing more and more towards the fullness of Christ. We are all being transformed into the fullness of God! Thus, as many scholars have observed, the point of Holy Communion is not so much that the bread is transformed; the point is that we, we human beings, are being transformed! It is **WE** who are being "transubstantiated!" In Holy Communion, we acknowledge that God is present everywhere, working out the purpose of filling all in all. God is present in small pieces of bread, and God is present in us.

Really Present.

We go to Holy Communion, the Eucharist, the Lord's Supper, in order to practice. The more we practice observing the presence of God in that communion wafer, the more we might be able to realize the presence of God in other parts of our lives: maybe in the world outside church walls, maybe in our neighbor, maybe even in our enemy. The more respect we give to that consecrated bread, the more respect we might be able to give to God's presence in other parts of our world. "Holy, holy, holy Lord, God of power and might, heaven and earth are full of your glory!" Amen.

A handwritten signature in black ink that reads "Sam Candler". The signature is fluid and cursive, with a long horizontal stroke extending to the right.

The Very Reverend Samuel G. Candler
Dean of the Cathedral of St. Philip