

Holy Communion

Frequently Asked Questions

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Why is Holy Communion so important to Christianity and to our church?

It is impossible to articulate a satisfactory answer to this question in one paragraph. Here's a start: The whole purpose of the Christian faith comes down to this word: Communion. - Communion with Christ and through him, communion with each other. Our destiny is to become participants in the divine life (II Peter 1:4), to make our home in God *together* (John 15:1-9). The Bible records the story of God's good creation, spoiled by sin and yet wonderfully redeemed by Christ. It is *through* him that a way has been made for us to enter into an eternal relationship with God by our incorporation into Christ, Himself (thus, all the language in the Bible about being "in Christ"). This whole story is captured in Holy Communion. When we receive Holy Communion, this seemingly simple act has profound implications both vertically (in relationship to God) and horizontally (in relationship to all others who partake). We are renewed as those awaiting our final adoption into God's household, who have the Spirit as a firstfruits and pledge of God's final redemption (Romans 8:14-25). Holy Communion is a foretaste in the present of the eternal Communion that we await at what the Scriptures refer to as the Marriage Supper of the Lamb (Rev. 19:6-9).

What do we mean by saying that Holy Communion is the basis of our identity and mission?

Holy Communion is what makes the church the church. It is in receiving the bread and wine that we are renewed, re-membered, as the *Body of Christ*. This is a tangible, bodily way of experiencing ourselves as "abiding" in Christ (John 6:53-57). We, in a sense, *become* what we eat. Rather than us transforming the elements into more of us (i.e. what happens in every other kind of eating we do), we are transformed into what we are eating. We receive the Body and Blood of Christ in the form of bread and wine, and in doing so we become (again) the Body of Christ - made tangible to the world. As recipients of this sacred meal, we are empowered with spiritual sustenance to go out and be what we have been made into - namely, the body of Christ, the continuation and extension of the earthly ministry of Jesus, commissioned and sent out *for the sake of the world*. . We become His hands and His feet and His mouthpiece.

What is happening in Holy Communion? Do you use the word "transubstantiation" or another term to describe what is happening?

Christians throughout the history of the Church have believed that Jesus is made bodily/spiritually present to us in and through the elements of wine and bread.¹ This is, admittedly, a difficult idea to swallow (pun intended) - both now in our era, and back when Jesus first said it (see John 6:41-71). It's a mystery² that Christians have tenaciously held to in spite of critiques leveled from those inside and outside the Church. Rather than merely remembering something that happened a long time ago as a memorial, Christians believe that we, ourselves, are transformed in the experience of participating in this most sacred meal. As Anglicans we are hesitant to specify how exactly this mystery transpires each week. Roman Catholics and some Orthodox Christians use the language of "transubstantiation" to attempt to suggest *how* Jesus is bodily present. We find this language less than helpful in that it depends on a very particular understanding of reality presented to us through the categories and language of Aristotle. It is, perhaps, one way of trying to articulate the mystery, but it has limitations and drawbacks. We'd rather not tie ourselves to one particular philosopher's way of describing things as the primary or only lens for understanding the Eucharist. So we do not use the term "transubstantiation" at Eucharist Church to describe what is happening. We're comfortable asserting that Christ is present and leaving the "how" a mystery.

¹ See *The Mass of the Early Christians* by Mike Aquilina for an accessible discussion of early church references to the Eucharist.

² Again, "mystery" is the meaning of the Greek word from which we get the idea of sacraments.

But is Jesus *actually* present in the bread and the wine?

We believe that Jesus is really present in the consecrated bread and wine - by the Holy Spirit. In a parallel way to how the Holy Spirit overshadowed Mary and brought forth the person of Jesus (Luke 1:35), we believe that Jesus is made present in and through the Holy Spirit via the prayer of the priest in the liturgy as he consecrates the bread in obedience to Jesus' command (I Cor. 11:23-26). Again, we don't need to know *how* he is present, exactly; just that He *is* present. This is one of the reasons communion is described as a sacrament (see below). By faith we recognize His presence in the same way that the disciples on the road to Emmaus recognized Jesus in the breaking of bread (Luke 24:13-35). In Holy Communion, the bread remains bread and the wine remains wine. Yet, in another sense, they are far more than merely bread and wine. One way to understand this is to remember that in Jesus' incarnation, His full divinity was present in His person throughout His entire life, though invisible to those around Him who merely saw Him as human (He was, in fact, fully human). This is a paradox - both in the incarnation and in the sacrament of Holy Communion. We affirm this even if we can't fully articulate it in satisfying ways. Ultimately, it's a mystery to be entered into rather than a logical puzzle to be explained.

What is a Sacrament?

Sacraments are mysteries. That is actually what the original Greek word for sacrament means: "mystery." Sometimes people try to explain sacraments by attempting to nail down what exactly is happening in them. Perhaps this is because we are uncomfortable in our late modern era with mystery and transcendence. There's much we don't know and can't comprehend about sacraments. What we do know is that a sacrament involves matter (water, bread, wine, oil, laying on of hands, etc.) within the created order where God has promised to be especially present. The Book of Common Prayer famously defines a sacrament as "*an outward and visible sign of an inward and spiritual grace given unto us, ordained by Christ himself, as a means whereby we receive the same, and a pledge to assure us thereof.*" All sacraments connect back to Jesus in His incarnation, who is the ultimate sacrament—God taking on a material existence within His own creation. At Eucharist Church, following in the Anglican tradition, following in the Anglican tradition, we speak of two "dominical" sacraments (dominical is Latin for "Lord"). These two sacraments are those instituted specifically by Jesus: Baptism and Holy Communion (Eucharist). Beyond this, the historical Church also added five other sacraments which, though they do not come directly from commands of Jesus, were held in high esteem: Confession, Marriage, Confirmation, Ordination, and Healing (Anointing). At Eucharist Church we also recognize the sacramental value of these actions though we do not specify that these are in the same category as the dominical sacraments, nor that sacramental actions are limited only to these seven.

What is the difference between a "sacrament" and referring to something as "sacramental"?

Christians affirm the creation, materiality itself, as good in light of God's repeated declaration in Genesis 1. As such, all of creation has the potential to be *sacramental*. However, there is an important difference between something that is *sacramental* and something that is a *sacrament*. A *sacrament* is a specific action ordained by Christ connected to a specific aspect of the life of the Church. To say something is *sacramental* is to recognize it as transparent to the glory and presence of the Creator God. As we give thanks for God's creation, it becomes transparent to the Creator who we worship and thus *sacramental*. Our goal is, ultimately, to see all of creation as sacramental, and thus transparent to the glory of God.

Is Jesus being re-sacrificed in Holy Communion?

No. We believe that Jesus was sacrificed once for all upon the cross (Heb. 10:10). But we do believe that in some mysterious way Jesus' death and resurrection are both brought into the present moment in Holy Communion each time it is celebrated. The way that theologians conceptualize this is to recognize the fact that God exists outside of time. This is why the Biblical writers can refer, for example, to Jesus as "the Lamb slain from the foundations of the earth" (Rev. 13:8). In our understanding of time, Jesus was crucified somewhere around 33 AD. But to God,

this is an eternal reality. We try to capture this bending of time by recognizing that in the divine liturgy (Sunday worship service), we are, in a sense, scooped up out of our earthly experience of chronological time into the heavenly realm – into the timeless eternal realities. It is here that we encounter the crucified and resurrected One afresh each week. In our experience of the liturgy, chronological time collapses into the present moment; the future is present (it’s what we’re getting a foretaste of), and so is the past. When we are remembering (Greek word: *anamnesis*); liturgically speaking, we are actually entering into something rather than just calling it to mind. We remember not only the past, but the future in Holy Communion. Trippy, right? But this isn’t just an idea; it’s an invitation to meet Jesus Himself.

Who should and should not be receiving Communion?

All baptized Christians who desire to live with Jesus as Lord should participate.³ What do we mean by living with “Jesus as Lord”? The confession that “Jesus is Lord” is the earliest Christian creed, and there is a lot packed into that three word phrase: It is the confession in which a person recognizes that Jesus is to be identified as the incarnation of the God of Israel (Yahweh) – the One who the Israelites referred to as “Lord” (*Adonai* in Hebrew). It is also the confession that Jesus is my master, that he knows what is best for my life – in every area of life. Practically this looks like obedience to God’s word. If someone is baptized and claims to be a Christian, but he or she does not intend to obey the teachings of Christ as entrusted to the Church in the Holy Scriptures, he or she is walking on very dangerous ground. Receiving Communion in this state would be fraudulent, self-deceptive, spiritually toxic, and possibly even mortally dangerous (I Cor. 11:27-34). This is what is meant by receiving Communion “unworthily”. It’s not that we’re ever *worthy* to receive Communion; in fact the point of Communion is that we recognize ourselves as distinctly *unworthy* of the Communion that is made available to us in Christ. So it is only from a state of humility and repentance that we can rightly receive Communion (worthily). If we’re not repentant and we attempt to receive Communion, we are actually undermining the very meaning of Communion itself and wrongly assuming that we’re entitled to Communion on our own terms. For this reason the priest always explains briefly to the church the “terms” upon which God welcomes us to the Table – only through Christ.

Why can’t non-baptized people receive Communion?

There’s a logical and spiritual order built into the way the sacraments operate. Communion is the renewal of a previous vow. That previous vow is the vow we make in baptism. Baptism is our incorporation into Christ; it’s the sacrament and ritual in which we receive a new identity. By entrusting ourselves completely to Christ (what the Bible means by “faith”) we receive Christ’s life through His death and resurrection, and His status as a Son in the household of the Father as our own. Communion is the renewal and deepening of the identity which has been graciously bestowed upon us in baptism. To use an analogy, baptism is like the wedding; Communion is like the reaffirmation and renewal of the one flesh vows that were made at the wedding in the form of sexual intimacy between husband and wife. Although the importance of this order in marriage and sexuality has been lost within much of Western culture (a problem of its own), Christians believe that order still matters in marriage and sexuality. Similarly, we believe that baptism ought to precede Communion. If you are not baptized but find yourself desiring to receive Communion, it’s a good sign that you ought to talk with a priest about pursuing baptism.

I’ve been away from the church for a long time, do I need to be re-baptized before I take Communion?

Definitely not. You may have wandered far from your Father’s house, but if you’ve been baptized you are still His son or daughter (Luke 15). Even when we are unfaithful, God is never unfaithful to His promise (II Tim. 2:13). The Church historically has rejected the notion of rebaptism – as long as the first baptism was truly a Christian

³ Anglicans practice a shared table with other Christians, meaning that all other Trinitarian Christians regardless of denomination are welcome to participate with us at the Table of Christ.

baptism (Trinitarian). We (alongside Christians throughout history) recognize infant baptism as being just as legitimate as adult baptism. This is because baptism is primarily about what God does in and to us by grace. Thus whether we were young or whether we knew exactly what we were doing when we were baptized is not primarily the point. That being said, the fruit of our baptism only comes about when it is combined with personal faith. We must live out the identity which is bestowed upon us in baptism for baptism to prove ultimately efficacious. If you aren't sure whether you've been baptized, there is a special baptism ceremony performed with language that allows for the possibility that you may have been baptized. Ask a priest about this. If you feel you need a "renewal" of your baptismal vows, there is the opportunity to do that as part of the liturgy on the Great Easter Vigil each year, and at every baptism service throughout the year. - It's built into the liturgy. Also, keep in mind that the receiving of Holy Communion *is*, by definition, a renewal of your baptismal vow.

What is the danger of someone taking Communion inappropriately? Why do we "fence" the table?

The danger is twofold: First, the person receiving Communion might be misled into thinking they are actually "in Communion" with Christ when in fact they are not. As the scriptures say, "God cannot be mocked" (Gal 6:7); you cannot trick God. To receive the elements of Communion when you are not intending to live with Jesus as Lord is to merely deceive yourself. It's mortally dangerous. This is why St. Paul tells the church in Corinth to discipline the man living in open, deliberate sin in their church by not "eating" with him (referring to both Holy Communion and casual fellowship). He must realize that he is not safely within the fellowship of the Church nor within the grace of God in order to be able to repent and be restored to actual fellowship, which is what Paul desires (see I Cor. 5:1-13). Second, for someone living in open, deliberate sin to be repeatedly offered Communion by the Church is to send a clear signal to others who know about this pattern of willful sin that such sin is not a big deal. It is to invite the Church into a sense of casualness in regard to the holiness of God. This can cause the stumbling of others. Unaddressed sin has communal implications. This is why we are careful to attempt to honor God in how we receive Communion. In some special cases - only after instruction, exhortations, warnings and multiple attempts at pastoral counsel, if a person persists in deliberate, unrepentant patterns of sin, a priest is under obligation not to offer the Sacrament to such a person. To continue to offer the Sacrament to such a person is to participate in their own spiritual self-deception and would be the ultimate act of disregard for Jesus' command to love our neighbor as one's self.

What if I'm gluten intolerant or can't have alcohol and can only either receive the bread or the wine? Am I getting an incomplete experience of Communion?

The Church has historically taught that to receive even the smallest portion of *either* the bread or the wine is to receive ALL of Christ. Thus, it is fine to respectfully pass on one or the other if there is some medical reason or personal conviction for doing so. As a congregation we attempt to offer a gluten free option for those who need such. Please ask the priest when you are receiving Communion. If for some reason you need to avoid alcohol, a traditional form of honoring the Sacrament is to kiss the side of the chalice in lieu of drinking from it.

Do I have to drink from the chalice? I'm worried about germs.

The value of a shared cup / shared loaf is that it is a powerful symbol of our unity in Christ (see I Corinthians 10:14-22). But, no, you do not have to drink directly from the chalice. If you're grossed out by this, you can *intinct* which means you dip your piece of bread in the wine in lieu of drinking directly from the chalice. If you are worried about germs, epidemiology studies have suggested that you are more at risk to germs during the *passing of the peace* or conversation in close proximity to others during the refreshments hour than with the shared cup. The non-porous, high quality metal used in the chalice means that the surface is easily cleaned after each person sips (which we do with the cloth). Second, the alcohol content in the wine (we use port), kills germs. The bottomline,

however, is that the risk for giving or receiving disease via Holy Communion is very low. If you are sick or have broken skin around your mouth, it's ok to just receive Communion in one form (bread only).

What is “reserved sacrament”?

Reserved Sacrament refers to Holy Communion elements intentionally set aside and saved for those who cannot be present at worship when the church is gathered on Sunday. Reserved Sacrament is consecrated with the rest of the Communion elements during the liturgy, but then carefully and respectfully stored in order to be distributed as needed by a priest, deacon, or trained lay eucharistic minister (LEM). It is then distributed in the context of a short liturgy that includes confession, scripture readings, and prayers that typically takes no longer than 10 minutes in total. This practice can be traced from the earliest times in the Church when Christians would take Communion elements to those who could not, for various reasons, be present at worship - slaves, the sick, people in prison, etc. This was a tangible and deeply meaningful way of communicating to the whole church that those who couldn't be present are still part of the family. In a similar way, in our own setting we believe that it is deeply edifying to receive Communion on a weekly basis; so we encourage people who miss worship to reach out to our staff to arrange a time for reserved sacrament to be brought to them. Our staff will do our best to honor every request for such; it's a joy to do so!

Can anyone “make Communion” ...or only priests?

This is a complicated question to attempt to answer in a paragraph. The short answer is that the Church has historically limited the role of consecrating Communion to two ordained offices: bishop and priest.⁴ There are various reasons for why this is a good idea that come back to an understanding of apostolic authority, proper lines of accountability for those who care for and lead congregations, protecting the teaching and sacramental life of the Church, and more. This question is more about the meaning of ordination than it is directly about who can “make Communion”. At one level, the priesthood of all believers taught in the New Testament (I Peter 2:9) points us toward our universal priestly calling to offer the world back to God in gratitude - thus transforming all of creation into a kind of eucharistic participation in the life of God. But in the midst of that calling, the Church has deemed it best to protect the consecration of the sacrament-proper (Holy Communion) to those who are set aside specifically for such - bishops and priests. We believe it is good and right to honor this tradition.

Why bread and wine? Does the matter *matter*?

When we use bread and wine we are simply following the form of which we were given Holy Communion by Jesus Himself. It was He who took bread and wine and commanded us to “do this in remembrance of me” (Luke 22:19). There is beautiful meaning built into the fact that we bring bread, not grain; wine, not merely grapes. God has invited us to add our own human transformation of the raw creation to the mix. We bring ourselves, our labor, our culture and tastes and we offer them to God who then makes them Christ's body and blood. Jesus wants our participation; this is part of the meaning of Communion. Though we try not to fall into an overly rigid mindset about it, we believe that Holy Communion is properly a wheat bread element combined with some variation of grape wine. In our case, we bake our own Communion bread with wheat and honey and choose to use port as our wine of choice due to its tasty sweetness and high alcohol content (useful for killing germs in a shared cup).

What happens to leftover Communion elements? What is the proper way to handle them?

There are three ways to properly and respectfully dispose of consecrated Communion elements: burn them, bury them, or consume them. We nearly always choose to consume what is leftover which is why you often will see people finishing off the elements not being “reserved” (see the question about “reserved sacrament”) during

⁴ Later, some Protestant denominations who did not have priests and bishops would nevertheless reserve the consecration of communion elements to the pastor or elder.

Communion or immediately following worship. But on rare occasions if Communion elements have been contaminated or spoiled we will bury or burn them. You will notice that whenever bread falls to the floor we pick up whatever bits we can find; these are then disposed of respectfully as was just described.

Why do we receive Communion every week?

There is no rule about having to receive Communion a certain amount of times each year.⁵ However, the practice of the Church from the earliest times was to receive Holy Communion each Sunday in honor of the resurrection of Christ. This rhythm already appears to be an established practice by the time the earliest New Testament documents were written (20 years after Christ's death and resurrection). We seek to continue this tradition in our own church practice and encourage people to receive each week remembering that, *"for as often as you eat this bread and drink this cup, you proclaim the Lord's death until he comes"* (I Cor. 11:26).

⁵ However, the Fourth Lateran Council (recognized by only the Western portion of the Church) which happened in the year 1215AD declared that all Christians must receive Holy Communion at least once a year. The need for this came about during a time when receiving Communion by the laity was more rare for unfortunate reasons.