

Magic, Meaning, and Mystery

In the early days of the Reformation, three great leaders came together to talk about supporting each other. These three were Martin Luther, Ulrich Zwingli, and John Calvin. It didn't work; the three had too many theological differences themselves to work together. What was the primary difference between them? The meaning and significance of Communion. The Church remains divided on what to make of this central practice in our faith – not just three views, but a thousand. Let me offer a wider picture. Imagine a spectrum, with the words **Magic** and **Meaning** at the two ends.



On one extreme are those who see Communion as having an almost **magical** power. The bread and the cup are like salvation pills, and if you take them regularly, your sins are forgiven. It doesn't matter if you understand what Communion is about. It doesn't even matter if you repent of your sins. All that matters is that the right words were said over them by the right personnel. This magical view has never been the official doctrine of any church, but it has been a common popular understanding. Picture a pre-Vatican II Catholic priest, back to the congregation, mumbling words in Latin then handing out wafers to envision this extreme.

On the other extreme is the view that I grew up with in the Southern Baptist Convention. There I was taught that Communion had no power at all. All that mattered was its **meaning**. We didn't even call it a sacrament. It was an "ordinance," which we did because Jesus told us to, and the only purpose it served was to illustrate the story of Jesus' death for our sins. It was an acted-out sermon illustration, nothing more. Result: we did Communion as seldom as possible, because it was basically pointless and just made us late to the Piccadilly Cafeteria after church.

Fortunately, somewhere between these extremes is another possible understanding. Yes, the meaning of Communion matters, but it is more than an object lesson. I have seen its power too often. I think of Jim, the old gentleman with mental illness who only let me into his tiny apartment because I brought him Communion. Through sharing the bread and cup, we became friends. I think of Geraldine, who on her deathbed responded to almost nothing, but who stretched forward for Communion. She could only swallow thickened liquids at that point, so I gently anointed her lips with the Blood of Christ, that she could taste and see how gracious the Lord is. Neither of these two saints experienced the presence of God in the sacrament as a point of doctrine. They experienced Christ directly. Here is the middle ground.



As Christians, we follow Jesus of Nazareth, who was entirely human, and yet *was something more*. How perfect, then, that we remember this Lord in a Sacrament that consists of sharing normal bread and juice – but that is yet something more. Through the Season of Lent, we will be holding a weekly lunch hour Communion in the Chapel on Thursdays – beginning on the 19th. Come taste and see how gracious the Lord is.