

Understanding Episcopal Liturgy

#44. Do Episcopalians believe in the doctrine of transubstantiation?

I've heard this question from several members of St. Paul's. The doctrine of transubstantiation does not appear to have been a key question or concern for the first generations of Christians. The doctrine seems to originate from the 12th and 13th centuries, when (at the Fourth Lateran Council of 1215) the doctrine of transubstantiation was affirmed as the position of the Roman Catholic Church. Transubstantiation argues that, through the work of the Holy Spirit, "the whole substance of the bread (is changed) into the substance of the Body of Christ, and ... the whole substance of the wine (is changed) into the substance of the Blood of Christ."

Some Episcopalians hold this understanding. Some Episcopalians reject this doctrine. Some Episcopalians are less concerned with precisely how or whether Christ is really present in the bread and the wine, and more concerned about whether we are really present as we are participating in the sacrament of communion.

A wide range of understandings of the sacrament of communion has been officially acknowledged ever since the reign of Queen Elizabeth I (1558-1603). Queen Elizabeth was a wise woman. In the ten years prior to her coronation, hundreds of English Christians had been killed *by other Christians*. Adherence to, or rejection of, the doctrine of transubstantiation was one of the key issues that seemed to motivate people, who claimed to be following Jesus, to kill Christians who held different opinions. 'The Elizabethan Settlement' affirmed that Christians will always have a wide range of understandings of the sacrament of communion.

*If you have a question about something in our liturgy, I will be happy to answer it. Please ask in person, or send an email to me at revmajor@stpaulsyr.org.
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