

# More than just a tiny, tasteless wafer

By Danielle Tumminio

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Last week, a clergy friend of mine introduced me to a [video](#) in which Baptist minister Gordon Atkinson undertook a communion bread taste test. One by one, he slid expensive wafers and cheap wafers, gluten-free and wheat, out of their sleeve and into his mouth.

He tasted one type and announced: “It really has no taste at all.... Is that a communion bread that will offend no one?” After reading the nutrition label on another, he said, “Fat: zero. Cholesterol: zero. Sodium: zero. Carbs: zero. Calories: zero. Vitamin A: zero. Vitamin C: zero. Iron: zero. Can you actually make food that has no nutritional value?”

Then he concluded with these words: “What are these things [communion bread] saying about the church? ... If this is a symbol for who we are, it’s really a tragic one because it sort of like looks fancy and nice, but there’s no nourishment there at all.”

Now Gordon Atkinson is not the first to express wafer woes. Clergy and lay people have long pointed out their flaws: Jesus didn’t use wafers at the Last Supper. Thin wafers encourage the kind of self-denial that leads to eating disorders. The simple wafer is as unsatisfying to the churchgoer seeking spiritual nourishment as fat-free ice cream is to the dieter craving a sundae.

Yet the alternatives are often unsatisfying as well: Pita and matzah hearken back to the kind of bread Jesus would have used at the Last Supper, but they’re a pricier alternative many churches can’t afford. Asking congregants to bake bread each week could result in a rector making early morning runs for Wonder Bread at the corner store when the baker is sick or her oven breaks. Some bread recipes are so crummy — literally — that congregants could raise the cup of wine to their lips and find specks of Christ’s body lying at its bottom.

Drives one to think maybe church leaders should ditch bread and wine for Hershey’s Kisses and Godiva liqueur, doesn’t it?

But if all of this explains why a majority of parishes use communion wafers, the answer is about as satisfying as Gordon Atkinson’s taste test. So where does that leave us? Is there nourishment in those fat-free, calorie-free, iron and calcium and vitamin-free wafers?

Maybe what Gordon Atkinson missed is the irony that in the end, how a wafer tastes isn't really the point. After all, it's not bread we Christians worship but Jesus and the way Jesus transforms our lives in the world. For many churchgoers, there is something of Jesus in the bread, something that would exist whether the bread presented itself as a wafer or a high-end artisan bakery purchase. And that something alters us and our relationship to God.

So the power of that bread is that, even in the form of a tiny, tasteless wafer, it changes us and empowers us to do God's work in the world. Sure, a tastier, richer bread might symbolize God's abundance in a more literal way. But these tiny wafers seem to say, "I offer you a simple gift. I offer you a chance to look past myself and to value what I do. If I tasted like I was just out of the oven of a Parisian bakery, you might forget that."

As I sit at my desk and think about the Eucharist, about the many times I've held out my hands for those skinny, tasteless wafers, I also recall the priest who handed them to me, the person who passed the wine, the congregants standing at my side, and the God-given grace of which I am continually in need. Yes, Holy Communion cannot take place without bread and wine, but it also cannot take place without community — without the love of God and neighbor. And so even if the bread is without calories or carbs, iron or calcium, it is never as empty and hollow as Atkinson believes. It is never without nourishment.

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