

Welcome to The Book of Common Prayer.

This week, week one of our series on the Book of Common Prayer (or “BCP” as we will usually refer to it), we will focus on what the BCP is, the reasons for it, and some of its history. We will expand on the details of BCP in subsequent weeks. I think it is important to start with a sense of the depth and breadth of this beautiful work. There will be no quizzes!

The full title of the BCP is *The Book of Common Prayer and Administration of the Sacraments and Other Rites and Ceremonies of the Church Together with The Psalter or Psalms of David According to the use of The Episcopal Church*. That gives us some idea of the enormity of the subjects and text we will find within this one relatively small volume.

I will occasionally insert BCP page numbers into these articles as an aid for those who have a Book of Common Prayer to look at the source material I am referring to in the BCP. Those page numbers will be in parenthesis.



Let’s start by describing what the BCP is. Probably more than any other contemporary religious group, Episcopalians are people of a prayer book. We are unique in this form of worship, and we are shaped by the BCP. Not only do we use the Book of Common Prayer for the conduct of our public services, but it is also the guide for our private prayer and the source of most of our liturgy.

When you visit an Episcopal church for the first time, or as a frequent visitor, you notice that the worship service follows a set order. In some Episcopal churches the BCP itself is used, and the worshippers are given a bulletin with only the appropriate page numbers listed. Others, like Good Shepherd, use a bulletin which contains not only BCP page numbers, but the entire text required for the worship service, as well as the readings or lessons and music. Either way, the service is the same. One is easier to follow without having to constantly flip through the pages.

Why is the book called The Book of Common Prayer? It is “common” because it contains the fixed texts of the regular services of the church—those used for public or common worship. It is also “common” because it uses the language we use in daily life, rather than a religious language such as Latin, Greek, or Hebrew.

By having a BCP, we Episcopalians worship in “common” and in unity with all other Episcopalians across the country. Our worship is also in common with the ancient liturgical

tradition of the Christian worship celebrated since the time of the earliest Christian communities. Because we use a BCP, we speak the same words and do the liturgical rites prayed by Christians for centuries. This is a rich tradition indeed.

We use the most recent version of the BCP, authorized in 1979. It follows an Anglican tradition dating back to 1549. The authors of the first Book of Common Prayer drew upon a wide variety of sources, including the ancient prayers the church had been using since its beginning in Judaism, the Roman Catholic and Orthodox liturgical traditions, the common worship, and private devotions of the Middle Ages, as well as the emerging rites and prayers of the Reformation period. The first BCP of the Episcopal Church in America was authorized in 1789. It relied not only on the Church of England BCP but also on the Scottish Communion Office with its Eucharistic prayers focused on the offering of the bread and wine and the sanctification by the Holy Spirit. These foundational beliefs are still part of our BCP.

You will be most familiar with the parts of the BCP which detail Holy Eucharist. The Eucharist which we celebrate each Sunday is taken directly from the BCP. But the BCP contains much more than the liturgies for the eucharist. It includes an amazing variety of liturgies, including, for example, the liturgies for Baptism, marriage, confirmation, and ordination. You will also find in it the list of the Scripture readings for each year, and statements of belief we call “creeds.”

During the next few weeks, as we explore many of the major sections of the BCP, you will develop a fuller understanding of this core book, and what it means for your life and faith as an Episcopalian. Welcome to the journey!

Yours in Christ, Deacon John

In addition to the Book of Common Prayer, the three books which I will use as primary sources for these columns are:

“Welcome to the Book of Common Prayer” by Vicki K. Black, Morehouse Publishing, 2005

“Walk in Love, Episcopal Beliefs & Practices” by Scott Gunn & Melody Wilson Shobe, Forward Movement, 2018

“Praying Shapes Believing, A Theological Commentary of the Book of Common Prayer” by Leonel L. Mitchell (updated by Ruth A. Meyers), Seabury Books, 2016

