

GETTING FAMILIAR WITH *YOUR* BOOK OF COMMON PRAYER

The *Book of Common Prayer* has been around for centuries (Whitsunday 1549) but, more, it is a collection of what has been around since Christianity began. It is an instrument by which each individual Christian is ensured to receive the “catholic” (whole) faith – to receive what has been believed ‘everywhere, always, and by all.’ The purpose of this morning’s class is to give a detailed overview of this wonderful book so that we might feel more comfortable when seeking to use it. Hopefully we will leave this morning’s class realizing what a great aid the Book of Common Prayer is to our Christian progression.

D) TITLE PAGE –

*THE BOOK OF COMMON PRAYER
and Administration of the Sacraments
and Other Rites and Ceremonies
of the Church*

At once the reader understands that he holds in his hand a summary of the devotional experience of Christian people gathered from all centuries of Christian progress. This is not an Episcopalian composition but is the Prayer Book of *the Church*.

*ACCORDING TO THE USE OF THE
PROTESTANT¹ EPISCOPAL CHURCH
IN THE UNITED STATES OF AMERICA*

It is a plain statement that the Episcopal Church has not gone peculiar, and that it proposes to worship in spiritual harmony with the whole Body of Christ’s people. It is also an indication that the Episcopal Church consciously acknowledges a devotional inheritance which has come down through the ages, and which binds the Church today straight back to its apostolic origin, not only in theory, but in the actual practice of worship.

II) RATIFICATION - You will notice that the year of ratification for the 1928 BCP is 1789 (Oct. 16). In 1789 the Declaration of America’s independence had been established and the new “American” church thought it necessary to adapt the prayer book to the recently changed political situation. The changes were made and ratified². Since 1789 however any revisions have not been considered legally necessary to receive new ratifications.

¹ *Note that in this title page the word “PROTESTANT” does occur. This is the only time this term will be used in the whole of the book. It is there as a legal designation only (even as Roman Catholics are officially called “The Holy Roman Church”). We, as Anglicans, are not protestants but catholics.

² *In the current ratification it is stressed that this Prayer Book is in line with “the Liturgy of the Church.”

III) PREFACE – “The Preface summarizes in brief: (1) the general principles of the Church’s worship as they are represented in the Anglican tradition; (2) the reasons for the edition of an American Prayer Book distinct from the English book; (3) the nature of the American revision of the English book; and (4) a concluding, brief commendation of the book to the Church’s membership and ‘every sincere Christian.’”³

The Rt. Rev. Frank Wilson in his book, *An Outline of the Prayer Book* writes: It (the Preface) not only justifies the alterations made at the time but hints at the probable necessity of further alterations in the future; at the same time declaring emphatically that there is no intention whatever of departing “from the Church of England in any essential point of doctrine, discipline, or worship.” The Preface of 1789 is a very important statement both of principle and of policy.

IV) CONCERNING THE SERVICE OF THE CHURCH, INCLUDING THE USE OF THE PSALTER AND THE LECTIONARY - All of these pages deal with the Service(s) of the Church : the Holy Communion, the Order of Morning Prayer, the Order of Evening Prayer, the Litany, and special emphasis is upon the use of the Psalter.

The basic purpose of this section is to ensure a loose liturgical unity amongst the various parishes within the Anglican Communion. It gives basic direction of how services should be celebrated within an Anglican parish, while at the same time leaving some discretion to the individual minister.

V) PSALMS AND LESSONS FOR THE CHRISTIAN YEAR - Again, in this section there is special emphasis upon the use of the Psalter. The Christian Church, following the example of its Jewish antecedents, has always had the regular reading of the psalms. However in the medieval times there arose the multiplication of many minor Holy Days. This eventually led to the reiterated reading of certain psalms to the neglect of the remaining ones. The writers of the BCP sought to reform this neglect by laying out most of the Psalter throughout the church year: giving a varied selection of psalms for certain subject matters (p. ix BCP), by listing certain psalms for special occasions (p. xlii – xliii BCP), and ultimately by adding the note that “in places where it is convenient, the Psalter shall be read through once every month.”

VI) THE CALENDAR – The Christian Year is undoubtedly the greatest safeguard ever devised for preserving the integrity of the Christian Gospel. The Church Kalendar is the method by which the Christian Year functions in the Church. Popular sentiment, as well as individual preference, has a great tendency to bend the Gospel along the line of temporary interests. Calvinism becomes absorbed in the sovereignty of God and divine judgment, to the neglect of His love and mercy. The pressure of Unitarianism is upon the benevolent fatherhood of God, and the Incarnation of our blessed Lord is ignored. Methodism concentrates on personal religious experience, while the devotees of the “social Gospel” are almost exclusively concerned with the Christianizing of society in the bulk. All of these are part of the Gospel but none of them is the entire Gospel. Fractional Christianity may serve an immediate purpose but, in the long run, the world needs the whole Gospel of Christ. Religious faddists with a flair for mysticism often support their position with the

³ Shepherd, p. v.

Bible but they are likely to quote you only the writings of St. John, while so called “practical Christians,” who find little need of worship, appeal exclusively to the Sermon on the Mount and a few selected parables of our Lord. Revivalists are long on the Bible but usually favor only the Epistle to the Romans and such chosen texts as fit their argument for faith and conversion. Millennialists drown themselves in the symbolism of Daniel and the Apocalypse. No one will deny that each of them has hold of a truth, but, like the blind men with the elephant, neither the trunk nor the tail can tell the story of the animal itself, however real those extremities may be.

Herein lies the value of the Christian Year and the Church Kalendar. Once in every twelve months the Church circumnavigates the life and teaching of our Lord. The important points of the Gospel are commemorated annually in a Season, a Sunday, or a Holy Day. To follow the Christian Year is to share in a balanced Gospel.

The **ten** Seasons begin with the preparation for the coming of Christ, touch the chief events in His life, and, in the Trinity season, expound His teaching: **Advent Season, Christmastide, Epiphany Season, Pre-Lent, Lent, Passiontide, Eastertide, Ascensiontide, Whitsuntide, Trinity Season.** These are punctuated with special Holy Days dedicated to particular events, such as the Feast of the Circumcision, the Presentation in the Temple, the Annunciation of the blessed Virgin, Maundy Thursday, Good Friday, and the Transfiguration. Interspersed with these are the Saints’ Days, commemorating the lives of great Christian (figures).

A great deal of space is taken with Tables of Lessons from Holy Scripture for all these Sundays, Feast days, and Fast Days. It is not just an interesting system which someone has compiled for theoretical purposes. It is the product of long Christian experience. Week by week, year in and year out, we follow our Lord in a steady round of commemoration so that no part of the Gospel is lost in the Christian practice of the (twenty-first) century. More than that, the Church Kalendar binds modern Christians in close affinity with their forefathers in the faith. Christmas today is the same feast that gladdened the hearts of men and women a thousand years ago. Easter today stirs the same assurance of eternal life as it did for Christians of the Middle Ages. The Kalendar preserves the solidarity and the continuity of the Christian revelation. It submerges fragmentary eccentricities in the wholeness of the Gospel. Call these festivals props to faith if you like. But what human has ever lived who did not need helps to sustain his wavering purposes? The Church has learned the lesson of human needs through many generations of practical experience with men and women who are struggling for better things.

VII) TABLES AND RULES FOR THE MOVABLE AND IMMOVABLE FEASTS, TOGETHER WITH THE DAYS OF FASTING AND ABSTINENCE THROUGHOUT THE YEAR, AND THE DAYS OF SOLEMN SUPPLICATION -
Some of the days within the Christian Year are fixed days, falling always on certain dates, while others are movable feasts. The movable portion of the Christian Year is dependent on the date of Easter Day in any given year. Pages are taken in this preliminary section (of the BCP) for directions about determining the date of Easter, with “Golden Numbers,” “Dominical Letters,” Leap-year exceptions, and so on. It is a major mathematical problem which might well be relegated to a corner in some place other than a book of worship. Suffice it to say that Easter may fall on any date between March 22nd and April 25th inclusive, depending upon the occurrence of the first full moon after the vernal equinox, and a table is given of the actual dates in successive years – thanks to the astronomical ingenuity of liturgical

scholars. Knowing the date of Easter in any given year, one is able to check across the Table of Movable Feasts and discover their dates in the same year.

VIII) TABLES OF PRECEDENCE – see page li BCP. This section lists the Holy Days which have precedence of any other Sunday or Holy Day.

IX) TABLES FOR FINDING HOLY DAYS – refer to # VII.

X) THE ORDER FOR DAILY MORNING PRAYER and THE ORDER FOR DAILY EVENING PRAYER - to be discussed in separate class.

XI) PRAYERS AND THANKSGIVINGS – The following intercessory prayers may be classified according to subject and theme : 1 to 4, the State; 5 to 12, the Church and its Ministry; 13 to 17, the Order of Nature; 18 to 22, War and Peace; 23 to 30, Education and Christian Service; and 31 to 36, the Sick and Afflicted.

To comment on a few:

For the Church (p. 37 BCP) – This prayer first appeared in 1667 in *A Summarie of Devotions*, drawn from a manuscript of Archbishop William Laud (d. 1645). It came into the Prayer Book in 1928, but with not a few emendations of Laud’s own wording. Many have regretted the substitution of the present ending (cf. Heb. Vii.25) for Laud’s more vigorous ‘where it is divided and rent asunder, make up the breaches of it, O thou Holy One of Israel’ (cf. Amos ix.11). In this fine prayer is conveyed the Anglican doctrine concerning the ‘holiness’ and the ‘catholicity’ of the Church. The Church is ‘holy’ because it is called of God and set apart for His purposes, because it has received the gift of His Holy Spirit and has been entrusted with holy things. It is true that its members have not yet achieved a pure and perfect state of life, and that there is both error and sin in the Church; but the Church is holy in its promise, not in its attainment. The term ‘Catholic’ is rightly applied to Christendom as a whole, as a potential unity and fellowship in common Faith, Ministry, and Sacraments. In actuality this unity does not exist, for the Catholic Church is in schism – ‘divided and rent asunder.’ No single branch or particular communion of this Catholic Church can rightly arrogate to itself the claim to be the sole and only possessor of God’s truth and grace.

For Rain (p. 40 BCP) – The objection so frequently made today to prayers of this sort – that they are superstitious attempts to interfere with the orderly course of nature – is based upon false premises. It assumes, first of all, that God is no longer able to affect and control the universe He has made. Secondly, it denies that God is interested in the material, no less than the spiritual, welfare of His creatures. Thirdly, it supposes that the gift of material blessings cannot subserve the coming of His Kingdom, which is His ultimate purpose. Our Lord taught us (Matt. Vi.33) that those who seek first the Kingdom of God and His righteousness may rightly expect from God all the good things they need. Our prayers therefore need not be limited to requests for spiritual things only, though they should always be governed by spiritual purposes.

A Bidding Prayer (p. 47 BCP) – The Bidding Prayer is the oldest form of intercessory prayer used in the Church’s common worship, older even than the Litany. It is also the only form of corporate liturgical prayer that has always been said in the vernacular language of the people. In the early Church, the celebrant would bid a particular intention of prayer, and then all would join in silent prayer for a brief

period, after which the celebrant would sum up in a collect the common petition of the congregation. The discretion granted to the minister to lengthen or shorten the Bidding Prayer has always been recognized, and represents one of the few surviving relics in our liturgy of an informal, adaptable element, inherited from the earliest days of the Church. **I use the Bidding Prayers on Good Friday after the Sermon.**

XII) THE LITANY – “Litany” is a Greek word meaning prayer or supplication. In English the word denotes a special type of prayer: a series of biddings, invocations, or petitions pronounced by a minister or cantor in alternation with brief responses said together by the entire congregation.

The use of litany forms in Christian worship was first developed in the churches in Syria during the fourth century, but they were not an invention of the Church. Not only were they already familiar to pagan worship, but they appear to have had some use in Judaism. When the Arian controversy was raging, the Arians used to resort to public parades to popularize their doctrines. To counterbalance such marching propaganda, St. Chrysostom introduced processional litanies in which the people went up and down the streets singing forth their supplications.

There is no human need which is not touched somewhere in the course of the Litany. Over a period of fifteen hundred years a few petitions have been dropped and others added to meet changing conditions of life. For instance the old petition for travelers was for those who “travel by land or by water,” but in the last revision this was brought up to date by making it read for those who “travel by land, by water, or by air.” The main portion of it has remained constant through many centuries. After all, human needs do not change a great deal.

***The Litany was the first service in the Prayer Book which Cranmer translated into the English tongue.**

***Cranmer had originally put in it a request of deliverance “from the tyranny of the bishop of Rome and all his detestable enormities!”, but Queen Elizabeth had it removed.**

XIII) A PENITENTIAL OFFICE FOR ASH WEDNESDAY – At the time of the Reformation certain persons overemphasized the doctrine of “justification by faith” to a point where sin and its consequences were largely obscured. To counteract this distortion the Church of England inserted a “Commination” service in the Prayer Book of 1549 for particular use on Ash Wednesday. This service was a denunciation of sin, an acknowledgment of its penalties, and likewise a plea for divine mercy. ...This Commination was adapted in the American BCP as a Penitential Office.

It is a wholesome reminder of that side of the Christian religion which modern people most easily forget – namely, that God is not only a loving Father but also a righteous Judge who cannot ignore willful disobedience to the Divine Law. I use this service on Ash Wednesday before the administration of Ashes and the Ash Wednesday Eucharist.

XIV) THE ORDER FOR THE ADMINISTRATION OF THE LORD’S SUPPER, OR HOLY COMMUNION – The Holy Communion is the primary and central act of corporate worship of the Church, and regular participation in its observance is a solemn obligation upon all the faithful of God. Every other liturgical service of the Church is centered in it, being either an anticipation, or a preparation, for it, or a consequence and development of it. It was instituted by our Lord as a perpetual re-

representation of the new Covenant established by God for His people through the self-sacrifice of His Son upon the Cross for our sins, and as the earnest of our redeemed and joyful life with Him in His eternal Kingdom. It is the principal means of our communion and fellowship with Him and with one another in His mystical Body, the Church, whereby we receive the gracious benefits of His sacrifice: the forgiveness of our sins and the spiritual power to conform our lives to His righteous will. As the celebration of the supreme revelation of God's love and purpose for His creatures, the service demands of all who share in it a correspondent return of self-giving devotion, entire and unreserved, in faith, in hope, and in charity. For this is 'our bounden duty and service.'

By the middle of the second century the pattern of the Eucharistic celebration had become fixed in all the several churches of the Roman world, an ordered arrangement of the liturgy that underlies all the rites of the universal Church in both the East and the West.

The Eucharistic Liturgy contained in the BCP is in line with the historic and traditional rites of the Church.

XV) THE COLLECTS, EPISTLES, AND GOSPELS – This section of variable prayers and lessons used at the Holy Communion on the several Sundays and holy days of the Church Year is called the 'Propers' of the Eucharist; and they carry on in our Prayer Book the tradition of the Western Church, developed since the fourth century, of relating significant portions of the Eucharistic liturgy to the seasonal themes of the movable and immovable feasts and fasts.

XVI) THE MINISTRATION OF HOLY BAPTISM, OFFICES OF INSTRUCTION, THE ORDER OF CONFIRMATION, THE SOLEMNIZATION OF MATRIMONY, THE THANKSGIVING OF WOMEN AFTER CHILD-BIRTH, THE ORDER FOR THE VISITATION OF THE SICK, THE COMMUNION OF THE SICK, THE ORDER FOR THE BURIAL OF THE DEAD, AT THE BURIAL OF A CHILD –

This section of the Prayer Book contains what are known as the Occasional Offices. They are principally derived from the Sarum Manual, except for the Offices of Instruction, which are essentially the Catechism drawn up at the time of the Reformation, and the Order of Confirmation, which in medieval times formed part of the Bishop's book of services known as the Pontifical.

Broadly speaking, these services follow the normal sequence of events in the life of a Christian – baptism, instruction, confirmation, marriage, the arrival of children, sickness, and death. The purpose of this whole division of the Prayer Book is to provide ministrations to fit the chief events which are likely to happen in the normal life of any Churchman. Unusual exigencies cannot very well be anticipated, but if Christian people take God regularly into their normal calculations, they will have little difficulty in finding Him when something exceptional occurs.

***Service for Adult Baptism – This service was not in the original Prayer Book manuscripts. Before the Puritan Commonwealth in England infant baptism was such an unquestioned custom that there was no provision for the baptism of older people. But during the Commonwealth confusion reigned, and when the Restoration took place many children had grown up without the opportunity to be baptized. Therefore in the revision of 1661 a new service was added for the "Baptism of Those of Riper Years."**

***Special Rubric concerning Confirmation – The last rubric at the end of the Confirmation service establishes the customary rule for communicants of the Church, namely that people should be confirmed before being admitted to the Holy Communion. “And there shall none be admitted to the Holy Communion, until such time as he be confirmed” – this was the rule of the Church inserted in the first Prayer Book of 1549. So it stood until 1661. But again, the Church was vigorously suppressed during the Puritan Commonwealth and at the end of that period it was found that there were many people who had never had an opportunity to be confirmed. Rather than deny the Sacrament to such people, the concluding phrase was added to the rubric at that time – “or be ready and desirous to be confirmed.”**

***The Thanksgiving of Women after Childbirth – The old Jewish law required a ceremony of purification for a mother after the birth of her child. This seems to have been a widely-prevalent custom among many races of people. Pursuant to this requirement St. Mary appeared in the Temple with an offering after the birth of our Lord, and a remembrance of that event is still preserved in the Church Kalendar in connection with the Feast of the Presentation of Christ in the Temple. ...Out of this comes the brief service of the Thanksgiving of Women after Child-birth, commonly known in England as the “Churching of Women.” It is simply an appropriate expression of gratitude and a petition for God’s blessing on the new-born child.**

***The Visitation of the Sick – The Church proceeds upon the principle that illness affects the whole life of a person. When one is physically out of order there is bound to be a reflection upon the mental and spiritual state of the patient, and, *vice versa*, a mental and spiritual difficulty often upsets one’s physical stability. Therefore sick people need spiritual help just as they need physical care.**

***The Communion of the Sick – When, because of illness, people cannot come to church, the Church is ready to come to them. Sometimes it is by the priest bringing of the Reserved Sacrament, sometimes it is a bedside celebration of the Mass with an abbreviated service such as is provided at this place in the Prayer Book. The service may also be shortened to a minimum, as circumstances may require, especially in cases of the *Viaticum* – that is, Communion when death is imminent. If a person, because of an extreme illness, cannot partake of the Sacrament a rubric allows the priest to instruct the sick person to make a spiritual Communion instead.**

***Burial of the Dead – Reverent care of the dead has always been a matter of concern to Christian people. The Gospel of the Resurrection has set an indelible mark on the Christian conception of death. The early disciples looked on it not so much as the end of something as the beginning of something better. It marked the termination of earthly trials and the opening of a fuller and finer life. The Church prays for her people during the course of human life and does not cease to pray for them after the episode called death. But the prayers are for the peace and happiness of the departed rather than for release from problematical suffering.**

XVII) THE PSALTER, OR PSALMS OF DAVID – The psalms are religious hymns and the Book of Psalms was the hymn-book of the Jewish people. It was taken over as a hymn-book by the Christians and was built into the structure of Christian worship.

***The term “Psalter” simply means the collection of Psalms set for liturgical use. The Psalter is not strictly speaking a part of the Prayer Book, but it is bound with it for the convenience of the people in the recital of their daily prayers.**

***Taken together, the Psalms cover the full range of human needs and emotions. There are Psalms of praise and happiness, of petition and intercession. There are morning Psalms and evening Psalms and Psalms for special occasions. Some are carefully planned literary productions and some are spontaneous outbursts of feeling. This is why they are universally helpful for devotional purposes.**

***The Psalter of the Prayer Book differs from that of the King James Bible. The Psalter of the Prayer Book was taken from the most current English translation of the Bible at the time – known as the “Great Bible.” By the time the Authorized Version of the Bible was produced in 1611, the people were so used to the older version of the Psalter that the revisers left it unchanged.**

XVIII) THE FORM AND MANNER OF MAKING, ORDAINING, AND CONSECRATING BISHOPS, PRIESTS, AND DEACONS (i.e. The Ordinal) -

The original statement in the Preface (p. 529 BCP) of the Ordinal is not a theory but a fact. However much scholars may dispute the origins and primitive significance of the threefold Orders of Ministry of the historic Church, there can be no debate respecting their existence in the time of the apostles. In the mission churches they founded the apostles appointed elders (or, presbyters, later to be known as priests), after the manner of organization in Jewish communities, to serve as a council of oversight and governance (Acts xiv.23 & xx.17). The liturgical and pastoral needs of the new Christian communities were in the hands of ministers known as bishops (‘overseers’) and deacons (‘servants’). The bishops presided over the Eucharist in the absence of an Apostle, and supervised the charitable distribution of the offerings of the people to the sick and needy. In both these duties they were assisted by the deacons. Other forms of ministry were also common in the churches of the apostolic age, such as those of prophets, teachers, healers, et cetera, but these were not ordained and appointed; rather they were inspired by the Spirit, and their ministrations were received by the churches only so far as they were recognized to possess a true inspiration unto edification.

In the generation following the death of our Lord’s appointed Apostles, the Church throughout the Roman world began to suffer persecution from the government without, and a growing menace of false prophets and heretical teachers from within its fold. These dangers necessitated a strengthening of authority, with the result that within each Christian community a single bishop came to be the undisputed head of the local church; he was recognized as the barrier of apostolic authority, the defender of apostolic faith and discipline, the chief pastor and shepherd of his flock, and the ‘high-priest’ of its liturgy. The elders became his subordinates, and in his absence, his deputies, thus taking on more and more responsibilities of liturgical presidency, as the churches grew in numbers too large to meet as single congregations. The deacons continued to serve in their traditional capacities as assistants of the bishop, or, in his absence, of his elder-deputy. This hierarchy of Holy Orders was firmly established everywhere in the Church by the middle of the second-century, and its divine ordinance remained unquestioned until the time of the Reformation. The Church of England refused to accept the doctrine of the ‘parity of ministerial Orders’ as developed in the Reformed Churches of the Continent, and least of all the rejection, so prevalent among the sects, of ordained ministers in favor of inspired lay leaders, deriving their authority from congregations to which they ministered. It held steadfastly to the tradition of the universal Church that only those ministries are valid – that is, duly commissioned to

bear authoritative witness to apostolic teaching and consecrated to perform priestly acts of blessing and absolution – that have had Episcopal Ordination. The Book of Common Prayer is extremely careful to preserve the commissioned Ministry of the Church.

XIX) THE LITANY AND SUFFRAGES FOR ORDINATIONS – These requests and prayers are in accord with the ancient custom of the Church.

XX) THE FORM OF CONSECRATION OF A CHURCH OR CHAPEL – This service is to be officiated by a bishop.

*When proceeding up to the altar, the twenty-fourth Psalm is recited antiphonally. Traditionally this Psalm is supposed to have been composed by King David when he brought the Ark of the Covenant in triumph to Mount Zion.

XXI) AN OFFICE OF INSTITUTION OF MINISTERS INTO PARISHES OR CHURCHES – The service of Institution is designed to be not only impressive but instructive. It sets forth clearly the respective duties and obligations of a Rector and of his congregation, their mutual responsibilities, and their common service to God through His Church.

XXII) A CATECHISM – The term ‘catechism’ is derived from a Greek word meaning ‘to instruct by word of mouth’ or ‘to learn by echo.’ Related to it is the word ‘catechumen,’ used in the Church since the earliest times to denote a person undergoing instruction and preparation for baptism. The practice of educating the laity became lax as time went on however. The Reformers were instrumental in revitalizing this most ancient and important practice.

*The Question and Answer form of instruction (p. 577 BCP) has been found to be the best means of inculcating important tenets and doctrines of the Faith.

XXIII) FORMS OF PRAYER TO BE USED IN FAMILIES – Christian people are not expected to leave their religion in storage, even though the storage place might be a consecrated church building. Public worship is an essential to any properly regulated Christian life, but it does not absolve one from the necessity of carrying one’s religion back home. Therefore no Book of Common Prayer would be complete without a section of family devotions. In one way or another people should worship God as a matter of daily habit. The Prayer Book offers a variety of material which may be brought into use in the widely differing conditions of the modern home.

Two forms are provided for both morning and evening use, one a longer form and the other shorter. To these are added some carefully prayers which may be used separately or in connection with any one of the regular forms. One of the best ways of keeping a religious touch alive in the family is by offering thanks at the family table. Two simple and brief forms of “Grace” are given at the end of this section.

The old-fashioned home may have passed largely into history and the old method of Family Prayer may have gone with it. But the family is still the unit of society, and some definite recognition of God belongs in the life of every family. Those who realize this are thankful that the Prayer Book has not forgotten to follow people home from church and live with them day by day.

XXIV) ARTICLES OF RELIGION

XXV) SUMMARY

Such, briefly, is the Book of Common Prayer – not only a manual of public worship and private devotion but also a compendium of Church doctrine in actual practice. It is a formulary of the Church’s teaching. The Prayer Book, together with the Constitution and Canons, declare the Christian religion as the Episcopal Church has received the same. Its importance to English-speaking Christendom is beyond estimation. Its history is a saga of the Church’s struggle to preserve the Gospel “pure and undefiled.” Its influence has gone far beyond the Anglican Communion which gave it to the Christian world.

No sincere Churchman can treat such a Book casually. It is something to be pored over, and it seldom fails to reward the inquirer with new spiritual treasures. It should not be enough to use it for following the course of a public service. He who familiarizes himself with its contents gains a broad education in the essentials of the Christian religion. A copy should be in every home. On a wedding anniversary it would be in order to study again the Marriage Service. A sick person might with profit lay aside the popular magazine and read for a few minutes the Office of Visitation. The Book abounds with prayers suitable for private use – either at home or in a few quiet moments in church before a service begins. One never exhausts its resources. The Prayer Book should be the steady companion of every Churchman.

By The Rev. John A. Hines with additional data by The Rev. Canon Blair W. Schutltz

Sources: The Oxford American Prayer Book Commentary, by Massey Hamilton Shepherd, Jr. ;
An Outline of the Prayer Book, by The Rt. Rev. Frank E. Wilson

Connecting the dots...

Some general overviews of what the Book of Common Prayer does:

- a) *It provides a catholic approach to the Bible* – While virtually all Christians claim the Scriptures to be their final authority, the manner in which they use (or misuse!) the Bible differs greatly. No one needs to be told that the Scriptures can be subjected to the most hideous distortion by those who take snippets here and there and turn it into an entire religion (as did the Branch Davidians). The method is called “proof-texting.” By it the Bible can be made to support almost anything from murder to flying saucers. The Book of Common Prayer, by contrast, requires us to approach the “whole” Bible, to search out the “mind of the Bible” by means of a lectionary, which is a table of daily readings which insures that the entire Bible forms our beliefs. It has been estimated that if the lectionary were faithfully used, the Psalter would be read through every month, the New Testament once a year, and a

large part of the Old Testament once a year (with portions of the Apocrypha thrown in). Compare this with those who are broken-record-stuck on one chapter out of John or Romans, or who concentrate on one single book out of the 66, to the neglect of all others! The Prayer Book provides a wholesome approach to the Bible by insuring that all parts of it have a place in our belief system.

- b) *It provides the individual with a broad approach to the great salvation epic* – The Prayer Book provides us with an equally broad approach to the great salvation epic of Jesus Christ through the varying emphases of the Church Year. For about half of the year Prayer Book Christians re-live the salvation story through our observance of Advent, Christmas, Epiphany, Passiontide, Easter, Ascension, and Pentecost. Then in the long Trinity season we concentrate on the teachings of the Lord and His Apostles. Thereby we are enabled to embrace the entirety of New Testament faith!
- c) *It is a link to our Christian heritage* – Again, the Book of Common Prayer joins us with the broad current of Christian tradition. We find the legacy of the saints of all ages in the Prayer Book, the theologians, the reformers, the formative events such as the great Ecumenical Councils, the Reformation, and so forth. Compare this to those who imagine that Church history is a trifle, who feel they must leap over 2,000 years of Christian development directly to the New Testament without regard for wisdom and inspiration of the ages of Faith. Surely this constitutes a repudiation of the work of the Holy Spirit. The Prayer Book enables us to keep faith with our spiritual ancestry through incorporation of the ancient prayer books and other documents of religion.
- Next to the Bible itself, the Book of Common Prayer has played a more important role in the life of the English-speaking world than any other single book. It is the printed symbol of the spiritual aspirations of many generations of Christian people. To know it and to use it is to place oneself in the wholesome company of those who have borne witness to Christ in days gone by – often when such witness was a costly test of loyalty to God and fidelity to His Church.
- The Prayer Book connects people with the faithful of bygone ages who have passed on their treasures of worship tried and tested in the common desire to learn best how to worship God “in beauty of holiness.”
- d) *It protects us from heresy and from pseudo-Christianity* – The Book of Common Prayer provides us with bedrock Christian morality. The Prayer Book does not hedge on the moral absolutes of the Judeo-Christian tradition. They are chiseled in stone. Their uncompromising standards remain a clearly-defined alternative to the morality-is-what-you-make-it-out-to-be of many modern churches.
- People often delight in reducing their religion to the simplest possible terms. “My religion is to do good to others,” “My religion is the Golden Rule,” “My religion is to help my fellowman” – all this is good and in line with the spirit of Christ, but it is not the whole Gospel. The Prayer Book keeps the whole vocation of Christians constantly before them – whether they like it or not!
- e) *It protects us from the cultish tendencies of Man* – The liturgy of the Book of Common Prayer delivers us from the big “pulpit personality.” The charismatic figure plays a major role in American religion. One can observe

examples on the so-called Christian networks: the smoothie, the ranter, the milker of emotions. Some have a genuine message to convey. Others are charlatans. But for us the Prayer Book is at the center of things – at once the voice of the people, and the voice of God. The Prayer Book is personality enough for us. It has charge of our worship together. It does not leave so important a matter to the whims of a single person, much less a “worship committee.” To that extent it is the most democratic of worship forms, for it belongs equally to all. The day it was published in 1549, the liturgy was taken out of the hands of priests and placed in the hands of ordinary, everyday Christians. It was the greatest democratization of faith that ever took place, a charter of equality, for it made all equal under the governance of that book – clergy and laity, rich and poor, educated and uneducated.

- f) *It offers a dignity of worship commensurate with the greatness of God* – With the Book of Common Prayer there can be no bringing God down to the level of pop culture, as is the case with so many contemporary churches. No Prayer Book parish could ever advertise itself as having “the best band in town.” That awesome distinction between the holy Creator and puny creature is assumed in every line of the Book of Common Prayer.
- g) *It is something timeless* – The Book of Common Prayer passes the ‘test of time.’ It began as the first translation of the Latin liturgy into English. The difference between that and subsequent revisions, over a period of 450 years, has been minimal, making it the oldest consistent liturgy in western culture. It is both a literary and a devotional document. By it the spirituality of such people as William Shakespeare, Thomas Cranmer, Richard Hooker, Lancelot Andrewes, John Donne, George Herbert, Jeremy Taylor, Jonathan Swift, George Fredric Handel, William Law, George Berkeley, John Wesley, Charles Wesley, John Newton, William Wilberforce, Samuel Taylor Coleridge, John Keble, Charles Dickens, Florence Nightingale, Evelyn Underhill, Charles Williams, Dorothy Sayers, C. S. Lewis, and T. S. Eliot, and others was formed.

From an article by Fr. David Edman of the Church of the Holy Communion, Dallas Texas - written for the “Depot Digest”.