

## **The Prayer Book Society: The BCP Story**

<https://www.pbs.org.uk/the-bcp/>

### **The Background to the Book of Common Prayer**

The Book of Common Prayer (BCP; also known as the Prayer Book) is the traditional service book of the Church of England, and is central to its faith. Compiled in the sixteenth century by Thomas Cranmer, and modified in 1662, the Prayer Book remains at the heart of our worship, and is the official doctrinal standard of the Church of England, as well as of most other Churches in the worldwide Anglican Communion.

The Prayer Book has been familiar to generations of men and women for their regular Sunday worship and to make holy the principal events of their lives, the births, the marriages and the deaths. It has been and continues to be loved for its wonderful language, dignified and memorable but always speaking to our human condition. Phrases from it have come into everyday use and have been quoted in literature. 'Till death us do part', 'read, mark, learn and inwardly digest', 'peace in our time'. After the Authorized (King James) Version of the Bible, the Book of Common Prayer is the most frequently cited book in the Oxford Dictionary of Quotations, and is one of the guiding influences on our language and the basis of religious expression in this nation.

The Collects, the special prayers for every week and season, are not hard to memorise and often express devotion that we cannot readily put into words. But far more important is its safeguarding of sound Christian doctrine. No book of services is based more closely on the teaching of the Bible, with words often drawn directly from biblical passages. While modern services sometimes seem to lack the deep reverence with which we should approach God, the Book of Common Prayer continually honours His awe and majesty while also reminding us that He is a loving Father, close to each of us. It recognises the seriousness of sin and also the assurance of pardon for all who turn to God in faith. We have never really understood the reality of human wickedness, so apparent in the world around us, until we can sincerely say of our sins 'the remembrance of them is grievous unto us: the burden of them is intolerable'.

The Book of Common Prayer appears in many variants in churches inside and beyond the Anglican Communion in over 50 different countries and in over 150 different languages. Traditional Lutheran, Methodist and Presbyterian prayer books have also borrowed from the Book of Common Prayer, and the marriage and burial rites have found their way into those of other denominations.

The leaders of great movements in the Church have been sustained by the Prayer Book, equally with the most simple worshippers. It has inspired musical settings from some of the best church composers. It keeps its dignity and offers its comfort in every setting from the cathedral to the small country church, or the visit for a communion in the home.

## **Archbishop Cranmer's Immortal Bequest: The Book of Common Prayer**

The Book of Common Prayer is central to the Christian faith as practised by the Church of England. Compiled in the sixteenth century by Thomas Cranmer, and modified in 1662, the Prayer Book remains the official doctrinal standard of the Church of England and of most other Churches in the worldwide Anglican Communion. Cranmer's memorable cadences have given guidance and illumination to generations of Christians in regular worship and at the turning points of their lives and continue to do so.

The Prayer Book is deeply rooted in the Bible: not only does it make very full provision for the reading of Scripture, but its services are in substance and language scriptural throughout. The Book of Common Prayer is irreplaceable as the guarantee of orthodoxy, dignity and beauty in the Church's worship. Its services are reverent in honouring the power and majesty of God, accepting the reality of human sin and joyfully acknowledging the pardon given through faith in Jesus Christ.

The direct and unambiguous words of the Prayer Book have become a familiar part of our speech, to the extent that it is, after the Bible, the most frequently cited book in the "Oxford Dictionary of Quotations". The Book of Common Prayer is one of the guiding influences on our language and the basis of religious expression in this nation.

**The Book-** The Book of Common Prayer appears in many variants in churches inside and outside of the Anglican Communion in over 50 different countries and in over 150 different languages. Again in many parts of the world, more contemporary books have replaced it in regular weekly worship.

Traditional Lutheran, Methodist and Presbyterian prayer books have borrowed from the Book of Common Prayer, and the marriage and burial rites have found their way into those of other denominations and into the English language. Like the Authorized King James Bible and the works of Shakespeare, many words and phrases from the Book of Common Prayer have entered popular culture.

### **History**

The first book, published in 1549, in the reign of Edward VI, was a product of the English Reformation following the break with Rome. Prayer books, unlike books of prayers, contain the words of structured (or liturgical) services of worship. The work of 1549 was the first prayer book to contain the forms of service for daily and Sunday worship in English and to do so within a single volume; it included morning prayer, evening prayer, the Litany, and Holy Communion. The book included the other occasional services in full: the orders for baptism, confirmation, marriage, 'prayers to be said with the sick' and a funeral service. It set out in full the Epistle and Gospel readings for the Sunday Communion Service. Set Old Testament and New Testament readings for daily prayer were specified in tabular format as were the set Psalms; and canticles, mostly biblical, that were provided to be sung between the readings.

The 1549 book was rapidly succeeded by a reformed revision in 1552 under the same editorial hand, that of Thomas Cranmer, Archbishop of Canterbury. It never came into use because, on the death of Edward VI, his half-sister Mary I restored Roman Catholic worship. On her death, a compromise version, largely 1552 with a few amendments from 1549, was published in 1559.

Following the tumultuous events leading to and including the English Civil War, another major revision was published in 1662 (Church of England 1662). That edition has remained the official prayer book of the Church of England and its 350th anniversary is now being celebrated. Two dates are often cited for the introduction of the Book of Common Prayer in 1662. The first is 19 May when royal assent was granted, the second is 24 August when the Prayer Book came into use. The details have kindly been researched by staff at the House of Commons Library.

The Dictionary of English Church History notes that: "...The Prayer book now remained unaffected by Parliamentary action till 1645, when its use was forbidden by the ordinances of the Long Parliament. A Bill for Uniformity passed the Commons in July 1661, but this was then delayed by the revision which was in progress. This was completed, and adopted by Convocation in December, and in 1662 the Bill was again considered in Parliament, and also in Convocation. The revised book was not discussed by either House of Parliament, though the Commons asserted their right to discuss it if they pleased. They also threw out a clause, introduced by the Lords, giving the Crown power to dispense with obligations of the Bill. It received the royal assent, 19th May. It orders the exclusive use of the book, which is annexed to the Act, in all places of worship from St. Bartholomew's Day (24th August) 1662, before which all ministers must publicly declare their assent to it on pain of deprivation..."

The House of Lords Journal records that "...the Act of Uniformity was given Royal Assent on 19 May 1662. The final clause of the Act of Uniformity stated that: XXXII. Provided also, That the Book of Common Prayer, and Administration of the Sacraments, and other Rites and Ceremonies of this Church of England, together with the Form and Manner of Ordaining and Consecrating Bishops, Priests and Deacons, heretofore in Use, and respectively established by Act of Parliament in the first and eighth Years of Queen Elizabeth, shall be still used and observed in the Church of England, until the Feast of St. Bartholomew, which shall be in the Year of our Lord God one thousand six hundred sixty and two..." Therefore, until St Bartholomew's Day [24 August] in 1662 the previous version of the Book of Common Prayer was still used.