

How to Use the Book of Common Prayer



*A Guide to the
Anglican Liturgy*

Samuel L. Bray and
Drew Nathaniel Keane



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by Samuel L. Bray and Drew Nathaniel Keane.
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Liturgy?



EACH WEEK, HUNDREDS OF MILLIONS of Christians all over the world go to church. There are some constants. In almost every church, Christians are praying, reading the Bible, hearing sermons, singing songs, and sometimes receiving the Lord's Supper. There are also differences. Some churches are more *liturgical*. That word can mean a lot of things, but we are using it to mean that the words said by the people and the minister (except for the sermon) are written down in advance, and the words usually don't change from service to service. When they do change, it happens on a fixed, predictable schedule. Liturgy is scripted, not improv.

Most Christians attend liturgical services. If you're Ethiopian Orthodox or Swedish Lutheran, if you're a Roman Catholic in Mongolia or an Anglican in Nigeria, then on a typical Sunday you almost certainly go to a liturgical service. That's been true for most Christians throughout history. But

for several generations, many Protestant churches in the Western hemisphere have been running in a different direction. They emphasize novelty and spontaneity, and they are making a sharp turn toward technology-saturated worship. Meanwhile, in the last few years, there has been a growing interest among Protestants, especially among young evangelicals, in liturgical worship. That may be why you picked up this book.

These two trends are not a coincidence. If you are tired of always chasing something new, and of following celebrity pastors and worship leaders, then liturgical worship can offer you a path of peace, a distinctive rhythm for how to be taught by Christ and abide in him.

Different churches have different liturgical “scripts.” Since the Reformation, the one that’s been the most widely used and influential in English-speaking churches is the 1662 Book of Common Prayer. This book you are holding will walk you through the Book of Common Prayer, inviting you into these liturgies that have shaped the lives of so many millions of Christians—from Jane Austen to the martyrs of Uganda, from John Wesley to the martyrs of Papua New Guinea.

If you struggle to summon up the right emotions and words, these pages offer another way. Here is soil that’s good for putting down roots. Here is a bench to sit down on and rest awhile—a place to stay put.

WHY LITURGY?

People are drawn to liturgy for varied reasons. And the reasons you’re attracted to it may not be the same as the

reasons you stick with it years later. After all, when you first participate in a liturgical service, you are learning what to do and might feel lost. You may even wonder what the point is. So here are eight reasons to be drawn to liturgy—and to stick with it.

First, liturgical prayers allow you to pray not only by yourself, but with other Christians. The culture of the post-modern West is intensely individualistic, and that atomism and isolation can carry over into our prayer lives. Liturgical prayers push us outside of ourselves. When we are praying liturgical prayers with other people, we are participants and not spectators. Even little children can participate because the consistency and repetition allow them to learn the prayers and say them before they're able to read.

Liturgical prayers connect us with other Christians—whether in the next pew or around the world, and through many centuries. This connection with the broader church is everywhere in the Book of Common Prayer. It contains many prayers from the Reformation, yet these usually go back further still, often back to at least the 600s. It also contains prayers and songs of praise that come from other Protestant churches and Greek churches. The creeds in the prayer book also unite us to each other and to the broader church. And the Lord's Prayer, the inheritance of all Christians, is the “signature tune” that appears at least once in every service.¹

Second, liturgical prayers give us words to say when we have none. Everyone encounters grief, loss, and despair, and when we walk through the valley of the shadow of death

(Psalm 23:4), we need prayer more than ever. When we struggle to find the words to say, liturgical prayers can come to the rescue.

Samuel Johnson, the writer of the first English dictionary, found solace in the prayer book in times of inner turmoil. “The sonorous cadences, the elegant repetitions and antitheses, of [the Book of Common Prayer] may strike some as cold. [Dr.] Johnson, however, did not need his heart warmed, but rather his racing mind calmed. For him, and for many who have felt themselves at the mercy of chaotic forces from within or without, the style of the prayer book has healing powers. It provides equitable balance when we ourselves have none.”²

Third, liturgical prayers allow us to say “Amen” with confidence. Our prayers say things about God. What we say should be true—but what if it isn’t? Our prayers also ask God for things. These petitions might be wise, but they might not be (Psalm 106:15). Liturgical prayers can let us know that what is being prayed is theologically sound and prudent. Writing to an American correspondent, C. S. Lewis said: “*Ex tempore* public prayer has this difficulty: we don’t know whether we can mentally join in it until we’ve heard it—it might be phoney or heretical. We are therefore called upon to carry on a *critical* and a *devotional* activity at the same moment: two things hardly compatible. The rigid form really sets our devotions *free*.”³ Lewis wasn’t the first to raise this concern. Writing almost two thousand years ago, the apostle Paul told the church in Corinth that it was important to pray and sing with understanding. Otherwise, Paul wrote,

if visitors from outside the congregation walked into a service, how would they “be able to say ‘Amen’ to your thanksgiving, since they do not know what you are saying?” (1 Corinthians 14:16 NIV).

Fourth, liturgy helps us remember that worship is serious business. We live in a democratic age, and we find it easy to be casual but struggle with formality and reverence. We have forgotten what it means to be a subject reverently approaching a king. But in worship, we approach the king of the universe, the holy and omnipotent God. To worship him means to offer what he is worth, to render to him what he is rightly due. As the psalmist says, “Give the LORD the honour due unto his name; worship the LORD with holy worship” (Psalm 29:2). The language of the liturgy is meant to be “thickened” language, with more body and depth than everyday language, but without being pompous or self-important (like the language of the Pharisee in Matthew 6:5). It’s not easy to strike this balance of elevation and humility, but for Christian liturgy the model is the language of the Scriptures themselves—especially the language of the Psalms, which are quoted again and again in the prayers of Jesus and of Paul. When a liturgy adopts the model of the Psalms, we are approaching God in a way that he himself has taught us.

One of the ways that language is fuller and richer in liturgy is through the use of older language. In fact, from the time of Christ to the present, churches have tended to worship in language that is older than what is spoken in everyday settings. Early Christians who heard the Psalms in Hebrew would have heard a classical form of the language.

Saint Augustine preached from Greek versions of the Old Testament that were hundreds of years old. Saint Jerome's translation of the Bible into Latin, called the Vulgate, was not consciously archaic when produced. But it certainly became so during its use over the next thousand years in the Western church, and the Vulgate did not completely replace the older Latin translation in the liturgy. And the King James Version was intended to be old-fashioned on the day it was published.

There's nothing inherently valuable about archaic expressions. "Thou" is not better than "you"; "beginneth" isn't superior to "begins." But there are still good reasons for the tendency to be conservative about liturgical language. To start with, because God has revealed himself and taught us how to worship him, the church has tended to treasure biblical words rather than risk losing too much in translation. So, for example, Hebrew words like *amen* and *alleluia* were carried over into Greek liturgy, then into Latin, then into English.

Another reason is that approaching the Holy involves not only joy but also fear. The writer Annie Dillard put it this way: "I often think of the set pieces of liturgy as certain words which people have successfully addressed to God without their getting killed."⁴ So there is a tendency to hand down and hold onto what we have learned through hard-won experience.

Another reason is that continuity turns our very words into a means for preserving the story of the church. The presence of the Greek *Kyrie eleison* (meaning "Lord, have

mercy”) in Latin liturgy, for example, preserved the memory of the early centuries when the underground church in Rome prayed and read the Scriptures in Greek. And keeping our liturgical language stable over time allows a rich network of connections to develop. Hymns can echo the liturgy, like the line from the *Te Deum* in Morning Prayer—“thou didst not abhor the Virgin’s womb”—that is echoed in the Christmas carol “O Come, All Ye Faithful”: “Lo, he abhors not the Virgin’s womb.” These allusions reverberate through our Bibles, liturgies, and hymns, like echoing voices in the stone vaults of a cathedral. Because this way of talking is associated with prayer, it signals to us what a special and sacred thing we are doing when we hear and say these words.

It is essential to understand the prayers we say and the passages we read, just like we need to understand the words we sing. But the language of the Book of Common Prayer is usually simple and straightforward, like John Newton’s “’Tis grace hath brought me safe thus far, / And grace will lead me home.” The challenge of the prayer book’s language is usually not understanding it, but really meaning it. Of course the liturgy will and must change over time. Lewis thought that as the English language changed, the Book of Common Prayer needed to change, too—and he suggested that the right pace was for it to occur “imperceptibly; here a little and there a little; one obsolete word replaced in a century.”⁵

Fifth, liturgy is a framework for hearing the word of God. In fact, we are never closer to the original setting of the Scriptures than when we hear them read in the liturgy. That’s

because the Scriptures were not originally written down for silent individual reading. By and large, they were written for public reading, usually in a worship setting and in cultures in which most people could not read and write, in order to prompt active response. Sometimes the biblical text even preserves the liturgy as a liturgy, with both the instructions and the words to say. An example is Deuteronomy 27:14-15 (NJPS):

The Levites shall then proclaim in a loud voice to all the people of Israel:

Cursed be any party who makes a sculptured or molten image, abhorred by the LORD, a craftsman's handiwork, and sets it up in secret.—And all the people shall respond, Amen.

So the Scriptures themselves show that liturgical worship is the natural setting for reading the Bible. And, by scripting appropriate responses to the Scriptures read aloud, liturgy shows us that God speaks in order to prompt action. His word is living and active; blessed are those who hear the word and obey (Hebrews 4:12; Luke 11:28).

Sixth, liturgical prayers offer protection for the laity. Clergy are human, after all, and that means it is easy to have favorite topics for prayer and preaching. What seems to the minister like a valuable emphasis can easily seem to the people like a private agenda or a hobbyhorse. Even when the prayers are written down, if they are not fixed but are changeable at the whim of the minister, the people may be subjected to innovations that are more eccentric than edifying. Jesus told the apostle Peter, “Feed my sheep” (John 21:17 KJV), not

“experiment on my guinea pigs.” Fixed liturgical prayers protect the laity from a constant churn of experimentation and even error.⁶

Seventh, the best liturgical prayers have a simple, sturdy beauty. God can hear and answer prayers in our own words (thank goodness!), but as those words tumble out, I might mutter things that are vague or circuitous—maybe distracted—with fits and starts and hesitations. I may want to ask God for something but be uncertain what to ask for. Maybe the words I say never fully amount to what I mean. Still, God knows. As one of the prayers in the Book of Common Prayer puts it, we are approaching “Almighty God, the fountain of all wisdom, who knowest our necessities before we ask and our ignorance in asking” (p. 267 in the 1662 International Edition). The words of liturgical prayers can be focused, concentrated, rich beyond what I can cobble together on the spot. Especially in public services, liturgical prayers help ensure that everything spoken will build up the whole congregation (1 Corinthians 14:4). And whether the prayers are spoken in public or private, these words, beyond our own ability to compose, can draw our hearts along a well-traveled path of devotion toward God.

Eighth, liturgical prayers can become inscribed in our memories. The prayers in the Book of Common Prayer effectively deploy repetition, rhythm, and other rhetorical devices.⁷ These prayers come from a time when written and spoken English weren’t so separate, when written English was written not just for the eye but for the ear, making it easier to memorize. We can learn these prayers by heart. We

can say them while we are walking, bicycling, or driving. We can remember them when we sit with a dying friend. And what is learned by heart can be shared across the generations. Liturgical prayers are like great hymns, such as “Rock of Ages” and “O for a Thousand Tongues to Sing”—they express gospel truths, with words that etch themselves into the memory, words that connect father and son, grandmother and granddaughter. What we memorize and meditate on will change us, becoming part of who we are (Psalm 1:2-3).

To be sure, not all liturgical prayers are well-crafted. Some are disposable and will not be handed down from generation to generation. It’s not clear whether the most recent batch of liturgical prayers, especially many written since the late twentieth century, will stand the test of time. But all eight of the reasons just given for using liturgy apply with full force to the classic Book of Common Prayer. It gives us words when we have none: words drenched in Scripture, reverent words, words that draw in old and young and that draw on the experience and wisdom of the broader church, words that are beautiful and memorable, trustworthy words.

WHAT ABOUT FREEDOM?

But liturgy can prompt questions, even objections. We all love freedom, and it’s built into human nature that we do not like to be told what to do. Before today, there’s probably never been another culture or era of human history where people so often praised individual freedom and choice. That presents a challenge for a book about liturgy. One of the first things you’ll notice in the Book of Common Prayer is

instructions printed in red (or in some editions, in italics). These instructions are called *rubrics*. As you turn the pages, you see more and more rubrics. It's almost like it's telling us, "Say *these* words, not some other words. Say *this* prayer, not some other prayer." These liturgical prayers that are written down in advance and not made up on the spot—do they constrain my freedom? Are these the "vain repetitions" (Matthew 6:7 KJV) that Jesus warned us about?

The pattern in the Bible might surprise you. When Jesus taught his disciples about prayer, he started with how to pray. Don't call attention to yourself; mean what you say; trust your Father in heaven (Matthew 6:5-8). But what did Jesus do next? He didn't give his disciples advice about the best structure for prayer. He gave them something even more useful: specific words to remember and use. "This, then, is how you should pray" (Matthew 6:9 NIV). And in the early church, the apostles followed this example of liturgical prayer. They said "the prayers" (Acts 2:42 RSV), which were likely liturgical prayers. We don't know what exactly these prayers were, but plausible guesses include psalms, familiar Jewish prayers, and the Lord's Prayer.⁸ And the apostles prayed at regular times of the day, whether at the temple in Jerusalem or away from it (Acts 3:1, 10:9).

Following these examples, Christians have always used liturgical forms for prayer, while also recognizing a place outside of the liturgy for spontaneous prayers. In the first centuries after Christ, fixed forms of prayer developed across the Christian world. The church year began to take shape in the first two hundred years after Jesus' birth, and in

different places there were settled patterns for how the sacraments of baptism and the Lord's Supper were celebrated. In both Eastern and Western churches, liturgical forms were the norm for public worship in the first fifteen hundred years after Christ.

That continued with the Reformation. It may be surprising to many Protestants today, but Martin Luther's Wittenberg and John Calvin's Geneva had liturgical forms for prayer and for the sacraments. The Protestant Reformation was about liturgy just as much as it was about doctrine, but it was not a rejection of liturgy. In fact, the reformers insisted on liturgy.⁹ But they wanted a liturgy that was not in Latin, so the people could understand it; a liturgy purged of corruptions; a liturgy that taught the people the word of God.

Of course, our hearts need to be in the prayers we say, and it is not enough just to recite the words. The liturgy does not work by osmosis; it does not form us as Christians automatically. The same is true for hymns and songs in worship. It is not enough just to sing the words without meaning them. Yet there are still many advantages to having hymns composed before a service instead of being made up on the spot—advantages like greater participation, assurance of doctrinal soundness, and compelling and memorable words. More than that, singing familiar hymns again and again actually enhances rather than diminishes their capacity to express the inarticulate longings of our hearts.¹⁰ If we can sing hymns written down in advance, without thinking that makes them fake or insincere, why not say prayers written down in advance?¹¹

The idea that liturgical prayers are in conflict with prayer from the heart, with really meaning what we say, is relatively new in Christian history. Jesus, the apostles, churches before and after the Reformation—all used fixed forms of liturgical prayer. For most of the last two thousand years, Christians have used liturgical prayers *and* spontaneous prayers, with liturgical prayers predominating in public worship and adding richness and depth to the spontaneous prayers used in private worship. This Christian tradition of liturgical prayer is carried on in the Book of Common Prayer, which we will explore in the chapters that follow.

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