

Welcome to the Book of Common Prayer

The Bible

Last week we discussed the Creeds. The creeds explain the core of our faith belief; what do we believe as Christians? And yet, there is one more book to become familiar with in addition to the Book of Common Prayer. That book, of course, is the Bible. We cannot, of course, attempt to study the Bible in one short article. The study of the Bible can take years. But what we will do today is to look at a broad overview of the Bible, why we read it, and how to read it.



The Episcopal Church has been described as a Bible church. That is because the Bible plays a central role in our beliefs and practices. We use four different readings from the Bible (the Old Testament, the psalms, the New Testament, and the gospel) at each Eucharistic liturgy. The readings at our Eucharistic celebration are not the only place where we hear the words of scripture. The words of our liturgy come from the Bible as well.

According to “Walk in Love”, “Approximately 70 percent of the Book of Common Prayer is biblical quotation—not only does the prayer book include the entire book of Psalms (582-808), but many of the most beloved and beautiful prayers and responses in the liturgy are also directly from the Bible.” Most of the phrases of the Eucharistic Prayers come directly from the Bible. The Bible is deeply ingrained in all we do as church.

Next, how do Episcopalians read the Bible. First, we consider both the Old testament and the New Testament as Holy Scripture. We believe God’s revelation to humanity begins with the first verse of Genesis. The story of God’s great love for us is constant and consistent throughout the Old and New Testaments. Secondly, we Episcopalians say that the Holy Scriptures of the Old and New Testaments are “the Word of God.” This means we believe the Bible is more than nice stories. It is the Word of God. In the Catechism (853) this is explained further: “The Bible is the Word of God because at the time of its writing, it was inspired by God, and because, when we hear these words today, we, too, can be inspired by God.”

And finally, we believe the Holy Scriptures contain all things necessary for salvation. As Episcopalians, you don’t have to read or pray The Book of Common Prayer or believe some set of ideas promoted by another book or source. The Bible is our primary text. The basics of the Christian faith are conveyed in the Bible, and Episcopalians are not required to believe or subscribe to anything that is not in the Bible.

Episcopalians take the Bible *seriously*. But that does not mean that we read the Bible *literally*. No one reads the Bible literally, not even people who say they do. For example, if a person read the passage where Jesus said, “I am the light of the world,” that would mean he would glow, that he emanated light. We believe that the Bible contains real stories about real

people and their experiences of God. We believe the Bible is true. The Bible tells us truth about ourselves, about the world, and about God.

Understanding the Bible seriously rather than literally is hard. We do this work, in part, by learning more about the Bible so we can better understand and interpret it. For instance, it might help in understanding the Bible when we recognize the Bible is a collection of sixty-six books and not a single book. And the Old Testament and the New Testament are made up of various sections of like material. Additionally, with the Anglican church as its source, Episcopalians also include the Apocrypha, a collection of books between the Old and New Testaments.

The books of the Bible were written by different people in different places in different times in different languages. Some of the books were written in Hebrew, some in Greek and some in Aramaic. The Bible is not all one kind of writing. For example, some books are poetry, some are history, some are law, and some are prophecy, and other genres.

In the words of “Walk in Love”: “The Bible was written by God for us. The Bible is fundamentally about relationship; it is a conversation, a communication, between God and humanity. Further, the Bible exists so that we might learn more about God and more about ourselves.”

In a nutshell, the Bible is the story of God’s great love for us, a story that is full of hope, a story that offers the gift and promise of everlasting life.

That completes today’s discussion. I hope you enjoyed our time together. Next time we will focus our time on Tools for Prayer and Study. See you then.

In Christ, Deacon John

“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