SOFTWARE & TECH

The Of Common Prayer 1662

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Introduction: A Timeless Pillar of Anglican Worship

For over three and a half centuries, few texts have shaped the spiritual and linguistic landscape of the English-speaking world as profoundly as **The Book of Common Prayer 1662**. More than merely a liturgical manual, this venerable volume stands as a cornerstone of Anglican identity, a masterpiece of English prose, and a testament to the enduring power of structured, communal prayer. Its influence extends far beyond the walls of churches, seeping into the very fabric of English literature, law, and cultural memory. To understand **The Book of Common Prayer 1662**is to understand a key to the religious, political, and social history of Britain and its global influence. This article explores its historical genesis, its defining characteristics, its theological nuances, and its remarkable legacy, demonstrating why this 17th-century text remains a living document for millions today.

Historical Context: Forged in Turmoil

The story of **The Book of Common Prayer 1662**begins in a crucible of political and religious upheaval. Its immediate predecessor, the 1559 Elizabethan Prayer Book, had provided relative stability for the Church of England for nearly a century. However, the English Civil War, the Interregnum under Oliver Cromwell, and the subsequent Restoration of the monarchy in 1660 fundamentally altered the religious landscape.

The Puritan movement, which had gained immense power during the Commonwealth, had effectively abolished the use of the Prayer Book, substituting it with the *Directory for Public Worship*. This period was marked by a deep desire for a more simplified, less ritualistic form of worship. With the return of King Charles II, however, the Church of England was also restored, and the need for a new, definitive prayer book became paramount. The Convocation of 1661, an assembly of clergy, was tasked with this monumental revision. Working with remarkable speed and meticulous care, they produced a text that would be authorized by Parliament in 1662, becoming the official liturgy of the Church of England. This was not a radical departure but a careful, conservative revision of the 1559 book, designed to bring unity after decades of division. It represented a crucial compromise—maintaining the traditional structure of worship while making minor concessions to Puritan sensibilities, a delicate balancing act that gave **The Book of Common Prayer 1662** its distinctive character.

Key Features and Innovations of the 1662 Edition

While rooted in the work of Thomas Cranmer, the 1662 version introduced several significant features that defined its unique character.

The Revised Baptismal Service

One of the most debated changes was the revision of the baptismal service, particularly the use of the sign of the cross. The new rubric explicitly stated that the sign of the cross used in baptism was not intended to be superstitious but was a lawful ceremony, a provision aimed at appeasing Puritans who viewed it as a relic of

Catholicism. This change exemplified the book's theological precision and its attempt to clarify practice without altering the core rite.

The Addition of the State Services

Perhaps the most visible innovation for modern readers was the inclusion of special services for November 5th (Gunpowder Treason), January 30th (the martyrdom of King Charles I), and May 29th (the Restoration). These were not just prayers but political acts, weaving the narrative of the nation's deliverance from Catholic plotting and civil war into the fabric of annual worship. They served to reinforce the identity of the Church of England as both a spiritual entity and a cornerstone of the state. These services, although removed from most modern editions, are a fascinating window into the 17th-century mindset that created **The Book of Common Prayer 1662**.

The Revised Psalter

The 1662 edition featured a careful revision of the Psalter, based on the Great Bible but with numerous corrections for clarity and accuracy. This version of the Psalms, with its majestic and rhythmic language, became the standard for Anglican chanting for centuries. The Coverdale Psalter, as it is often known, is a literary treasure in its own right, and its inclusion in **The Book of Common Prayer 1662**ensured its survival and continued use in daily worship.

The Celebration of Holy Communion

The service of Holy Communion, or The Lord's Supper, received detailed attention. The 1662 book clarified the positioning of the elements, the manual acts (the manner in which the priest takes the bread and cup), and the significant addition of the "Black Rubric". This rubric, found at the end of the Communion service, explicitly denied that a physical change takes place in the bread and wine and affirmed that kneeling to receive communion was not an act of adoration of the elements themselves. This was a direct response to Puritan fears of idolatry and remains a crucial theological statement within **The Book of Common Prayer 1662**.

The Enduring Literary and Linguistic Legacy

Beyond its liturgical function, **The Book of Common Prayer 1662**is arguably one of the most influential works of English literature. Its language—formal, dignified, yet deeply personal—set a standard for English prose that has echoed for generations. Phrases that are now embedded in the common tongue originated here:

- "Till death us do part" (from the Solemnization of Matrimony)
- "Ashes to ashes, dust to dust" (from the Burial of the Dead)
- "We have erred and strayed from Thy ways like lost sheep" (from the General Confession)
- "Peace be with you" and "Lift up your hearts" (from the Communion service)

This language shaped the sensibility of writers from John Milton and John Bunyan to T.S. Eliot and Evelyn Waugh. It provided a common vocabulary of faith and devotion across the English-speaking world. The rhythmic cadences of its collects, such as the famous "Collect for Purity" ("Almighty God, unto whom all hearts be open..."), are considered pinnacles of devotional writing. The 1662 Prayer Book was not merely read in church; it was, in many homes, the only book apart from the Bible itself, and it profoundly influenced how people thought, spoke, and prayed. Its literary merit ensures its study even outside religious contexts, a testament to the power of its prose.

Theological Significance: A Reformed Catholicity

The theology of **The Book of Common Prayer 1662**is often described as a via media, a middle way between Roman Catholicism and Protestant Reform. This is an oversimplification, but it captures an essential truth. The book is deeply Protestant in its emphasis on scripture, grace, and justification by faith. Its liturgy is built around the reading and preaching of the Word. Yet, it is also profoundly Catholic in its structure, its use of sacraments,

its liturgical calendar, and its reverence for tradition.

The Prayer Book's theology is embodied in its prayers. The Daily Offices (Morning and Evening Prayer) are built around the reading of the entire Psalter each month and the whole Bible each year. The Communion service, with its prayer of consecration and the words of institution, maintains a high sacramental theology, while the "Black Rubric" firmly rejects the idea of transubstantiation. This balance—Protestant in doctrine, Catholic in form—is the hallmark of the 1662 book. It is a theology of order, of common prayer, where the individual's devotion is properly expressed within the framework of the Church's corporate worship. This theological identity has allowed **The Book of Common Prayer 1662**to appeal to a broad spectrum of Anglicans, from Evangelicals to Anglo-Catholics, providing a shared language of faith that transcends theological divides.

The Structure of Worship: A Godly Order

The 1662 book provides a fixed order for all the principal services of the church. This included Morning Prayer, Evening Prayer, the Litany, and the Holy Communion. The catechism, the psalter, and the ordinal (services for ordaining clergy) were also included. This comprehensive structure meant that every parish, across the entire country, was using the same words for the same services on the same day. This created a profound sense of unity and national community. The "Common" in **The Book of Common Prayer 1662**is key—it is the prayer of the whole church, not the private devotion of an individual or the spontaneous offering of a congregation. This commitment to a common, authorized text was a radical idea in its time and remains a powerful force for unity in the Anglican Communion today.

The 1662 Prayer Book in the Modern World

Despite the proliferation of modern liturgical texts, **The Book of Common Prayer 1662**remains legally the official prayer book of the Church of England. While its use in parish churches has declined, it has experienced a notable revival in recent decades. For many, the older language offers a profound sense of awe, reverence, and continuity. There is a growing appreciation for its literary beauty and theological depth.

Furthermore, the 1662 book is the foundational text for numerous Anglican provinces worldwide, from the Episcopal Church in the United States to the Church of Nigeria. It serves as a benchmark against which all later revisions are measured. Its influence can be seen in modern prayer books like the American 1979 Book of Common Prayer and the Common Worship of the Church of England, both of which draw heavily on its language and structure. In an age of rapid change and liturgical experimentation, **The Book of Common Prayer 1662**stands as an anchor, a reminder of the church's ancient roots and its enduring commitment to offering God a sacrifice of praise and thanksgiving in the words of a timeless liturgy.

Conclusion: A Living Voice from the Past

The Book of Common Prayer 1662 is far more than a historical artifact. It is a living text, a voice from the 17th century that still speaks with clarity and power to the 21st. Forged in the fires of civil war and Restoration, it embodies a profound theological vision of ordered, common worship. Its language has shaped the literature of the English language and provided comfort and meaning to millions. It is a text that demands careful study and deserves deep appreciation. Whether one approaches it as a Christian seeking to understand the roots of Anglican worship, a historian exploring 17th-century culture, or a lover of language admiring the rhythms of its prose, **The Book of Common Prayer 1662**offers a rich and enduring treasure. Its ultimate legacy is its ability to lead ordinary people into the presence of God with words both beautiful and true, a task it continues to perform, day by day, across the world.

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