

A SHORT FIELD GUIDE TO THE EPISCOPAL CHURCH

Worship and Ceremony

By Mark Harris



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Introduction

For many people, entering into an unfamiliar space can be uncomfortable. A family who moves into a new town may enter their new living space with anxiety about how their lives will be different. A person who starts a new job enters into the work space with nervousness, wondering whether the office manager will like them or if they can do their job. In either of these situations, there is a common theme: the unknown. The unknowns in life are always the things that can make us fear, but yet they can also be the things that excite our imaginations. The unknowns in life can be a profound new way of experiencing life with people who think and act differently than we do.

Personally, I can say that I have first-hand experience with how very DIFFERENT the Episcopal Church is from my Baptist background. There are all kinds of colors, symbols, prayers, and postures that were completely foreign to me when I stepped foot into my first worship service. And yet, these same physical things about the worship service spoke to me more deeply than any words possibly could. If a simple picture can speak a thousand words, then the motion-picture of the Episcopal style of worship speaks volumes. The use of symbol and picture may be very different from the way other Christian denominations worship; yet, just like the wider Christian Church, the aim of our worship is toward God.

This booklet is designed to be a basic introduction to the worship of the Episcopal Church. The Episcopal Church's worship service does not just minister to our minds, but to all of our senses. Keep in mind, however, that the worship is symbolic, and because of this, the symbols used in the service will have multiple meanings attached to them. The descriptions of each symbol will only be one explanation, when there are probably many more. I hope you enjoy this small adventure!

Doulos tou Xpistou,

Mark Harris

Section 1: The Worship Service



Grace Episcopal Church (2013)

When entering into the worship space of the Episcopal Church, there are many things to notice. People may usually notice that, at the front, there is an ornamented area that has a big cross, flowers, candles, an altar, a colored covering for the altar, and various other things. Another thing people may notice is that there is a hymnal and something called the Book of Common Prayer in the pews. Perhaps even the terminology of the service can seem strange and foreign. What do all of these things do/mean? Well, let's take a closer look!

Terminology

To begin, some Episcopal Church “terms and vocabulary” need to be defined. The first word that needs to be defined is the word “Eucharist.” The common Sunday worship service of the Episcopal Church is called the “Eucharist.” This is a Greek word that means “Thanksgiving.”¹ The gathering of God’s people in the church is primarily supposed to create an attitude of thanksgiving to God. The word “Eucharist” has also historically been used by many Christian traditions to refer to the Lord’s Supper, which is the principle act that Sunday worship in the Episcopal Church focuses on.

Another word that may be new to some readers is a word that was just used: liturgy. What exactly does liturgy mean? To put it quite simply, liturgy means “public work,” or “the work of the people.”² This liturgy of the Episcopal Church is a set service that contains many elements of historic Christian practice that developed very shortly after the time of Jesus Christ. Because the Episcopal Church patterns itself after the earliest Christian Church, the practices in the liturgy are going to have many prayers, actions, and symbolism that will closely reflect many different aspects of the Bible. In fact, most of the prayers that are said in the service are derived directly from various passages in the Bible.

The liturgy of the Episcopal Church is found in a book called the *Book of Common Prayer*, which is the main service book for all Episcopal Churches. In the *Book of Common Prayer*, the liturgy can be divided into two parts: the liturgy of the Word and the liturgy of the Table. The liturgy of the Word will have the lessons of the day from the Bible read out loud and these lessons will usually contain the following: an Old Testament reading, a Psalm that is read with the congregation, an epistle reading from the New Testament, and a Gospel reading. After these readings, a sermon will

¹ Thomas Howard. *The Liturgy Explained*. Pg. 12.

² <http://dictionary.reference.com/browse/liturgy>

be taught based upon one of the readings read that day, which usually is the Gospel reading. After this, there is a period of corporate prayer.

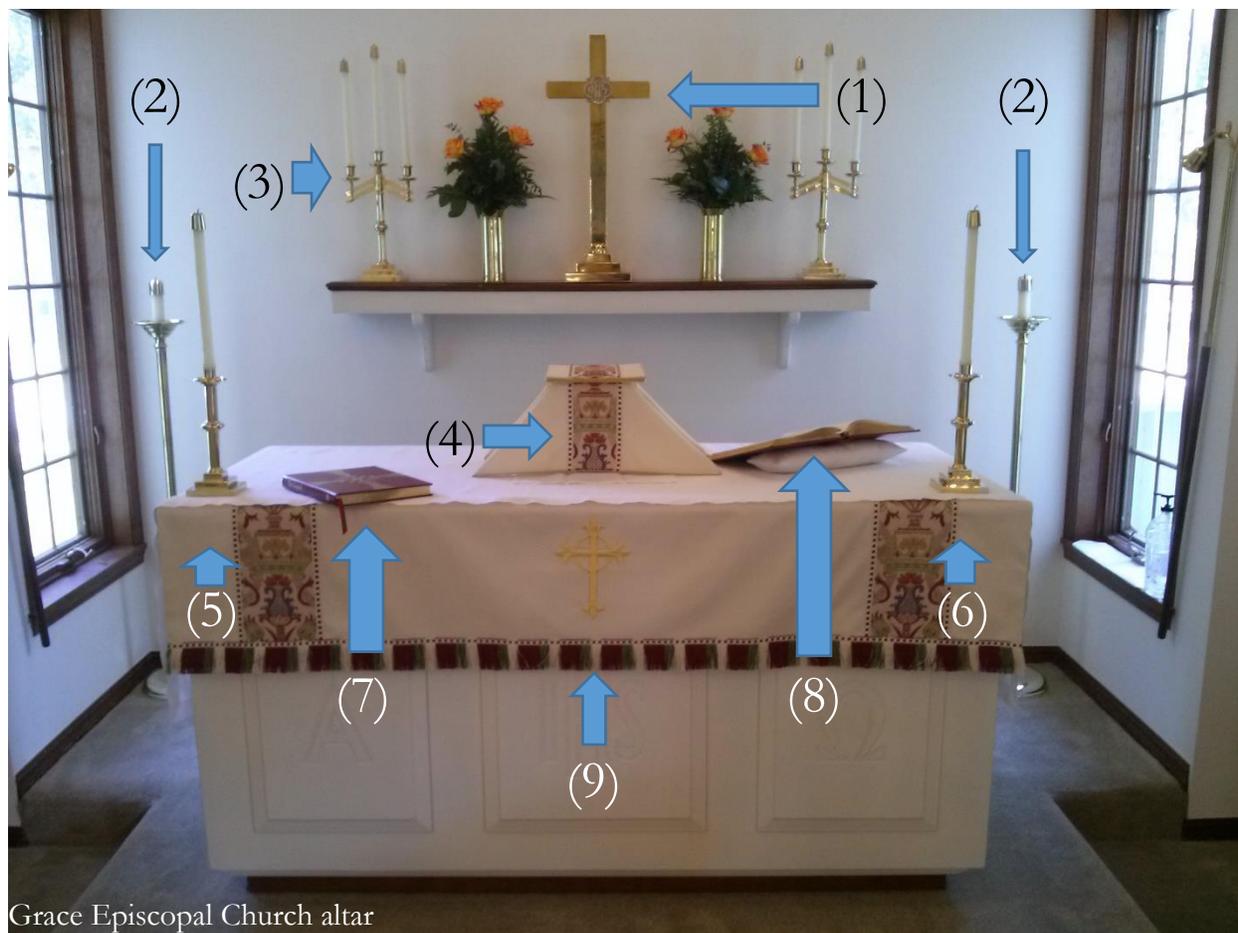
The liturgy of the Table is the second part of the Eucharist service where the Lord's Supper is served to the congregation from the altar. This part of the liturgy is probably the most difficult part to explain because the Lord's Supper is a sacrament of the Church. The word "sacrament" is a Latin word that means "mystery." The Episcopal Church uses this word "sacrament" to refer to what the *Book of Common Prayer* says is "an outward and visible sign of an inward and spiritual grace."³ To put it simply, the Lord's Supper is a visible sign of the mysterious and spiritual grace that Christ gives us through His body and blood. The Episcopal Church does not teach that the bread and wine actually turn into flesh and blood, but instead that the spiritual presence of Christ is mysteriously present in the bread and wine. This is why the word "mystery" is a good word to use for the liturgy of the Table.

The words "Eucharist" and "liturgy" are helpful to understand when one first walks into an Episcopal Church. This is by no means an exhaustive explanation of these words or the parts of the worship service associated with them, but it is a good beginning. The focus will now be shifted to what one may first see when walking into an Episcopal Church. In the next section, "The Worship Space," there will be pictures provided to illustrate and explain the "what" and "why" of certain symbols.

³ *Book of Common Prayer*. Pg. 857.

Section 2: The Worship Space

The Altar



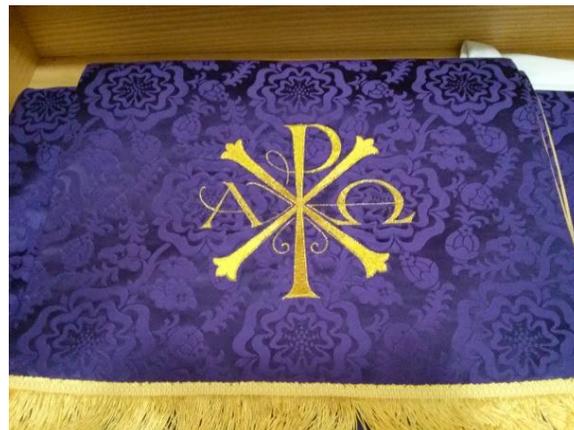
Grace Episcopal Church altar

- (1) **Altar Cross:** Usually the highest elevated ornament in the altar space.
- (2) **Acolyte Candles:** These are the candles that are carried by people who are helping out with the Eucharist. These people are called “acolytes.”
- (3) **Candelabra:** There are three candles on each side, which could represent a lot of Christian spirituality. The most common association is for the Trinity.
- (4) **Veiled Paten and Chalice:** The Paten is what the bread for the Eucharist will be served from. The Chalice is the cup which the wine for the Eucharist will be served.
- (5) **Gospel Candle:** This candle is on the side where the Gospel book (7) is set.
- (6) **Epistle Candle:** This candle is on the side where the letters/books of the Old/New Testaments are read from.
- (7) **Gospel Book:** Contains the Gospel readings that will be read for the service.
- (8) **Altar Book:** Contains the Eucharistic liturgy of the *Book of Common Prayer* and is read from when the liturgy of the Table begins.
- (9) **Altar Hangings:** Match the liturgical color of the day. In this picture, the color is white.

Symbolic Letters



IHS: These letters are used to stand for the name of Jesus. The Greek name of Jesus looks like this, with all capital Greek letters: IHSOYS. A shorter version of that name would be IHS.



Chi-Rho: The Chi-Rho looks like a P over the top of an X and this symbol stands for “Christ.” The Greek word for “Christ” looks like this: XPISTOS. As one can see, the first two letters are the X and P.

Alpha-Omega: In this picture, there is also an alpha and omega with which God refers to Himself in Revelation 1:8. The letters Alpha and Omega are the first and last letters of the Greek language, thus signifying that God is, according to the Revelation to John, “the One who is, who was, and who is to come.”

Priest's Clothes



During the Eucharist, all ministers and priests will wear distinctive clothing. This can be seen in the Old Testament where the Levitical priests would wear the clothing described to Moses by God. There are many reasons for wearing these certain special clothes, but for the sake of simplicity, the ministers will wear them to signify that they are taking part in the worship of God. When there is a special meeting with a President of a company, the employees will make an effort to wear their best business dress. It is the same idea with the Eucharist. When the congregation and ministers are about to have a special encounter with God, they make an effort to dress appropriately, and the clothes that the ministers and priests wear signifies that the Eucharist is this special encounter.⁴

⁴ There are special meanings that are attached to each piece of clothing, and a better description of each piece can be found here: <http://www.stpeteroshawa.com/articles/vestments>

Colors of the Church

During certain times of the year, the Episcopal Church will use specific colors to symbolize certain events and certain special ceremonies that will take place. The Episcopal Church will use green, purple, white, and red.⁵

<i>green</i>	<i>purple</i>	<i>gold or white</i>	<i>red</i>
Used during Epiphany and the 'Ordinary Time' after Pentecost Sunday.	Used for Advent and Lent	Used for Christmas, Easter, and other 'feasts' or festival days, along with marriages and funerals.	Used for Holy Week, the Day of Pentecost, and at ordinations.

Illustration 4: Liturgical Colors and Meaning (Credit: Grace Episcopal Church, gracesiloam.org)



⁵ Some in the Episcopal Church will also use the color blue for the season of Advent.

Section 3: Communion

The most central part of the Episcopal Eucharist is the table. We, as Christians, all gather around the table of Communion to worship God and to be fed by God in the Eucharistic meal.



Whereas other Christian forms of worship may focus on the sermon or perhaps the musicians to worship God, the Episcopal Church chooses consciously to gather around Christ's table, to partake of the bread and wine to which Jesus said, "My body is true food and my blood is true drink."⁶ This is the sacrament which we all partake in as a community of Christ-followers.



⁶ John 6:55, NASB.



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Thanks For Reading!

If this guide has made you more interested in the Episcopal Church, then please feel free to contact Mark (mark@gracesiloam.org) for more information.

“Go in peace to love and serve the Lord.” – BCP pg. 340