



Recently I was talking to an Evangelical who seemed to treat the Bible like a Sacrament, or seemed even to view the Bible as taking the place of the seven Sacraments. As I am an Anglican this seemed strange and alien to my understanding of the Christian Faith. And this is certainly not what I was taught. What is the place of the Bible in Anglicanism?

The historic Catholic Church – that is, the Roman Catholic, Eastern Orthodox, Anglican, Old Catholic, and Oriental Churches - teaches that the Real Presence of Christ exists in the Church in four modes: (1) in canonical Holy Scripture, (2) in the Eucharistic assembly, (3) in the Priest Celebrant of the Eucharist, and (4) under the form of the validly consecrated Bread and Wine of the Eucharist. As Father Peter Fink, SJ, has written, “His presence [in the Eucharist] is real. Each mode of his presence is ordered to serve his presence and his purpose in its own particular way.”

The historic Catholic Church teaches that canonical Sacred Scripture is the Word of God. The Catechism in the *Book of Common Prayer, 1979* in the section on Holy Scripture (page 853) teaches:

*Why do we call the Holy Scriptures the Word of God?*

We call them the Word of God because God inspired their human authors and because God still speaks to us through the Bible.

As the excellent *Catechism of the Catholic Church (Second Edition)* puts it:

In order to reveal himself to men...God speaks to them in human words: “Indeed the words of God, expressed in the words of men, are in every way like human language, just as the Word of the eternal Father [the Second Person of the Trinity, God the Son], when he took on himself the flesh of human weakness, became like men.”

For this reason, the Church has always venerated the Scriptures as she venerates the Lord’s Body. She never ceases to present to the faithful the bread of life, taken from the one table of God’s Word and Christ’s Body.

In Sacred Scripture, the Church constantly finds her nourishment and her strength, for she welcomes it not as a human word, “but as what it really is, the word of God.” In the sacred books the Father who is in heaven comes lovingly to meet his children, and talks with them.”

Your question, then, is not so much about the Anglican belief in the sacrality of Holy Scripture, its authenticity as the Word of God, as it is about which came – and comes – first, the Bible or the Church and the Sacraments. As I wrote on another occasion:

[Jesus said to His disciples] “...where two or three are gathered in my name, there am I in the midst of them.”

The New Testament scholars point out that what Jesus is using here is the contemporary rabbinical teaching that when two pious Jews sat together to discuss the words of the Torah (the Pentateuch, the first five books of the Old Testament), the divine presence was with them.

Although the significant of this one sentence probably completely escapes all of us, the disciples knew exactly what Jesus was referring to. Jesus is once again taking contemporary Jewish belief and practice, “giving it a twist,” and making it into an element of the New Covenant.

When they taught that when pious Jews gathered around the Torah the divine presence was with them, the rabbis were saying that religious faith centered in Scripture. Jesus said, “...where two or three are gathered *in my name*, there am *I* in the midst of them.” The Church of the New Covenant gathers together not around Scripture as in the Old Covenant but around the Person of Jesus Christ.

While Holy Scripture is of supreme importance as a divinely inspired witness to God’s Revelation in both the Old Covenant and the New Covenant, it is an historic fact that Jesus never wrote a word of Scripture. Jesus did not create (nor command nor talk about) a Bible but established a Church: the holy Catholic Church, which He empowered to continue His Incarnation. That is, the Church authoritatively continues to make Christ and His ministry actually and tangibly present in the world, just as He and it were for His disciples two thousand years ago, until He comes again at the end of time. And Jesus talked a great deal about His Church!

Christians gather – not around Scripture as in the Old Covenant – but around the Person of Jesus Christ, and it is the Catholic Church, the foundational Sacrament (and the seven Sacraments administered by the Catholic Church) that makes Jesus Christ actually and tangibly present in the world today. The Church came – and comes – first.

It was the Catholic Church, which Jesus Christ established here on earth and empowered by the Holy Spirit, that wrote the Scripture of the New Testament under divine inspiration. It is an historic fact that the Bible did not create the Church; the Church, under divine inspiration, created the Bible. It is only the Church that can authoritatively interpret the Bible. As the Catechism in the *Book of Common Prayer, 1979* puts it:

*How do we understand the meaning of the Bible?*

We understand the meaning of the Bible by the help of the Holy Spirit, who guides the Church in the true interpretation of the Scriptures.

Jesus Christ gave His disciples *as a body* the authority to “bind and loose” (St Matthew 18.18), i.e. to interpret authoritatively His revelation and apply it to new situations. Therefore the Early Christian Church taught – and Eastern Orthodoxy and Anglicanism continue to teach – that it is the Apostles (and their successors today, the Bishops validly consecrated in the Apostolic Succession) *as a body* who alone have been empowered by Our Lord to interpret authoritatively Holy Scripture.

## A Note on Translations

Episcopal Canon Law prescribes the translations of the Bible that may be used officially in this Church. In order to be authorized, a version must be an accurate, literal translation not a paraphrase (such as *The Living Bible*), and the Old Testament must be complete with both the First Canon and the Second Canon (the Deuterocanonical books, sometimes called the Apocrypha).

The English translation of 1611, popularly known as the “King James Version,” is actually titled the *Authorized Version*. Unlike England, Bibles sold in the United States as the *King James Version* are almost always abbreviated Protestant versions that do not include the Second Canon of the Old Testament and thus are not authorized for use in the Episcopal Church.