

“What is the Benediction?”

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(Originally published as “Grace Gets the Final Word” in the Presbyterian Banner, August 2005)

“The grace of the Lord Jesus Christ, and the love of God, and the fellowship of the Holy Spirit be with you all.” These are words, taken from 2 Corinthians 13.14, which the minister regularly says with raised hands as he pronounces the benediction upon the congregation at the end of a worship service. But what exactly *is* the benediction? Perhaps we have asked this question of ourselves but felt intimidated to ask it in public for fear of appearing ignorant. Perhaps we have been content to think of it merely as the way a service ends, sort of a reverent and worshipful way of saying, “That’s all folks.” Perhaps we have wondered why the minister raises his hands. We may ask, “Should I bow my head in prayer or should I look at the minister during the benediction?” If you have asked questions, you are not alone. It may be helpful, therefore, to give a short explanation of this ancient practice, especially since it is an important element of our worship service.

The benediction, from the Latin *benedictio*, meaning “blessing,” is a pronouncement of God’s blessing upon his people. In the first place, we should recognize the benediction as biblical. While the practice of pronouncing blessings goes as far back as Melchizedek to Abraham (Gen 14.18-20), Isaac to Jacob (Gen 27.26-29), and Jacob to his sons (Gen 48-49), the primary source is that of the Aaronic blessing found in Numbers 6.22-27:

The LORD spoke to Moses, saying, “Speak to Aaron and his sons, saying, Thus you shall bless the people of Israel: you shall say to them,

The LORD bless you and keep you;
The LORD make His face to shine upon you, and be gracious to you;
The LORD lift up His countenance upon you and give you peace.

“So they shall put my name upon the people of Israel, and I will bless them.”

This blessing placed God’s covenant name LORD (Yahweh) upon the people of Israel. Every time they received the benediction, God’s people were reminded of the fact that they were a people called by God into covenant with him and that they had the awesome privilege and responsibility of bearing his name. The Aaronic blessing is significant because it is the blessing that was used to Abraham’s descendents throughout the Old Covenant, but is the same blessing that even the Gentiles have come to receive: “that in Christ Jesus the blessing of Abraham might come to the Gentiles, so that we might receive the promised Spirit through faith... And if you are Christ’s, then you are Abraham’s offspring, heirs according to promise.” (Gal 3.14, 29). For this reason, the ancient church, as well as the Reformers of the sixteenth century, used the Aaronic benediction with great frequency.

But we also find benedictions at the end of nearly every New Testament epistle. Especially significant is Paul’s benediction in 2 Cor 13.14 due to its explicit Trinitarian

nature. It is into the name of the Father, the Son and the Holy Spirit that the Christian is baptized, and it is in the name of God that he or she is blessed. According to Calvin, the blessing which God gives in the benediction is himself. In giving us his name, he brings us into his care and gives us a share in the household of faith. When we receive the benediction in faith, God brings us into his presence and there, in his presence, we know that we are at peace with him. The Triune blessing, indicating the divine work of each person in the Godhead, communicates this beautifully.

We should also know that, historically, the minister has given the benediction with uplifted hands. This too is based on biblical precedent. Evidence of this appears from Aaron's blessing of the people in Leviticus chapter nine, where we read of Aaron offering sacrifices to the Lord on behalf of the people. In Lev 9.22, we read that after the offerings were made, "Then Aaron lifted up his hands toward the people and blessed them." The lifting up of hands in the parting blessing seems to have been the ordinary practice amongst Old Covenant priests, of which history testifies. But the most profound evidence is found in the parting blessing of our Lord himself in Luke 24.50-51: "Then he led them out as far as Bethany, and lifting up his hands he blessed them. While he blessed them, he parted from them and was carried up into heaven." Here we have a clear picture of Christ as our faithful High Priest and his fulfillment of the entire Levitical priesthood.

For this reason, the Reformers believed that the biblical gesture which was to accompany the benediction was not the sign of the cross, but the lifting up of the hands. As Christ's ambassador, the minister raises his hands to pronounce the benediction upon God's people at the end of the service. He does not do this with some sort of mystical or magical powers, but as Christ's appointed and ordained representative.

We should also understand that the benediction is necessary to the worship service because of the dialogical nature of our worship. By "dialogical" we mean that God's people are in dialogue with God during corporate worship. God speaks, and we respond. This is *vertical* conversation, not horizontal. We speak to God in the invocation, the corporate singing of psalms and hymns, prayer of confession, prayer of intercession, and confession of our faith, and God speaks to us in the call to worship, salutation, reading of the law, declaration of pardon, sermon, Lord's Supper, baptism, and the benediction. For this reason, the Reformers understood the benediction not as one Christian's prayer for other Christians, but rather as the bestowing of the covenant blessing, the blessing that God gave Abraham and that we as the spiritual descendants of Abraham receive by faith.

When we understand this dialogical nature of worship, we also see how God gets the first *and* final word in the worship service. After the call to worship and invocation, the service begins with God's blessing or salutation, which is God's response to the cry of his people and his divine covering of the whole service. All the elements of the whole liturgy now come to a head and are summarized in the solemn words of Numbers 6:24-26 or 2 Corinthians 13:14. Thus, the salutation and the benediction are like divine bookends to the holy activity of corporate worship which takes place in between.

The benediction, therefore, is an important element of our worship. Not only does this practice connect us with the ancient church and the covenant people of God all the way back to Aaron, but it gives us the opportunity to hear these words of blessing and grace pronounced upon us. The benediction is hardly the time to begin putting on our coat or collecting our things in preparation to leave. This is God's final word to us in the covenant assembly of worship that, for those who belong to him, we are not under his wrath, but the objects of his love and mercy. It is his holy announcement that we are sealed with his name and our whole life is covered by his grace. May we give God thanks and praise for providing us with the opportunity in our worship services for his grace to get the final word in our service of worship.