

## What's in a Benediction?

How do you end a worship service? Is it best to say, "You are dismissed", or to sing a final hymn, or send them off with "Please join us for coffee and doughnuts in the Fellowship Hall"? As always, we should turn to the Word of God to answer this question. Many churches have followed in the tradition of the pastor offering a benediction to end the service. The historic understanding is that a benediction is the conferring of a blessing by one of the elders (traditionally, the pastor) upon the congregation. Where has this come from, and what exactly is in a benediction?

The word 'benediction' means literally a 'good-speaking'. It is the pronouncement of blessing upon another. While it is a type of prayer, it is different than other prayers. Rather than a supplication to God to do something, it is closer to an act of obedience to God in His desire to bless the people through the leadership. It is done, like prayer, in obedience, seeking God's blessing. At the same time, as with preaching, it is done with an understanding of the God-appointed office and the privilege to confer something to God's people while in that office. The practice of the priest, apostle, and church leader blessing God's people is found throughout the Scriptures.

We have examples of these blessings from the patriarchs. Noah blesses his sons, Shem and Japheth (Gen 9:26-27), Isaac blesses Jacob (Gen 27:28-29) and Moses blesses the twelve tribes (Deut 33). With the establishment of the service in the Tabernacle and then the Temple, the priests were commanded to give a benediction over the people. In Numbers, we see the form given.

*"And the LORD spoke to Moses, saying: "Speak to Aaron and his sons, saying, 'This is the way you shall bless the children of Israel. Say to them: "The LORD bless you and keep you; The LORD make His face 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 on the children of Israel, and I will bless them."'" – (Num 6:22-27)*

The effect was that the name of the Lord was placed on the children of Israel, and they were blessed. One may only approach the throne of grace in the name of the Lord. Here, the priest symbolically placed the name of the Lord upon the people. When this was done in faith, God blessed them.

We find the practice occurring on several occasions:

Leviticus 9:22-24

*"Then Aaron lifted his hand toward the people, blessed them, and came down from offering the sin offering, the burnt offering, and peace offerings. And Moses and Aaron went into the tabernacle of meeting, and came out and blessed the people. Then the glory of the LORD appeared to all the people, and fire came out from before the LORD and consumed the burnt offering and the fat on the altar. When all the people saw it, they shouted and fell on their faces."*

Deuteronomy 10:8

*"At that time the LORD separated the tribe of Levi to bear the ark of the covenant of the LORD, to stand before the LORD to minister to Him and to bless in His name, to this day."*

2 Chronicles 30:27

*"Then the priests, the Levites, arose and blessed the people, and their voice was heard; and their prayer came up to His holy dwelling place, to heaven."*

It makes sense to see that Jewish mothers brought their infant children to Jesus to receive a blessing (Mark 10:13-16). Those who brought their children to the High Priest, believing Him to be the Messiah, were seeking the blessing of God. We also see the risen Christ giving a benediction before His ascension. *"And He led them out as far as Bethany, and He lifted up His hands and blessed them. Now it came to pass, while He blessed them, that He was parted from them and carried up into heaven. And they worshiped Him, and returned to Jerusalem with great joy, and were continually in the temple praising and blessing God. Amen."* (Luke 24:50-53)

We do not have express warrant given to the New Covenant community to continue in the practice of giving benedictions. But we have plenty of examples in the Scripture and in the early church as evidence that the practice continued. Examples of apostolic blessings are numerous in the epistles, and these epistles, remember, were read to the churches addressed (Col 4:16). Here we see the pattern continuing to occur at the end of the sermon. The end of the book of Hebrews, possibly an outline of a sermon, is one example.

*“Now may the God of peace who brought up our Lord Jesus from the dead, that great Shepherd of the sheep, through the blood of the everlasting covenant, make you complete in every good work to do His will, working in you what is well pleasing in His sight, through Jesus Christ, to whom be glory forever and ever. Amen.”* (Hebrews 13:20-21, see also 2 Cor 13:14, Eph 6:23-24, 2 Thess 3:16, 18, 1 Pet 5:10-11).

In addition, the early Christian church did not develop an order of service out of thin air. All indications point to the liturgy of the New Testament church following the pattern of the synagogue. In the synagogue, the sermon was followed and the service closed with a benediction pronounced upon the congregation. At this point the congregation answered ‘Amen’, which was the pattern of accepting the validity of the blessing with its responsibilities and consequences.

Some churches have erroneously thought that the priest, garbed in particular robes, carries with him sacerdotal powers, and is able to pronounce a blessing in the act of uttering particular words. They believe he can do this not only upon people, but also upon animals and inanimate objects as well. This, however, is not the teaching of scripture. Unfortunately, in reaction to this, some have taught that a benediction is nothing more than a prayer. But this seems to miss the emphasis of the Scriptures. Clearly, the benediction is a time when God intends to use His appointed leaders to accomplish something for His people. A blessing is being placed upon them. And His people, who stand in covenant relation to Him, may by faith receive that which is conferred upon them by the Holy Spirit.

The benediction was given not only with particular words, but particular actions as well. One or two hands were raised, and although we are not told specifically why, it appears it was a symbolic gesture of placing the blessing upon the congregation. *“Then Aaron lifted his hand toward the people, blessed them, and came down from offering the sin offering, the burnt offering, and peace offerings.”* (Lev 9:22). Jesus follows this pattern with His benediction just before His ascension - *“And He led them out as far as Bethany, and He lifted up His hands and blessed them.”* (Luke 24:50)

When considering the appropriateness of this activity along with the words of the benediction we should certainly avoid drawing attention to ourselves for the sake of drawing attention to ourselves. In addition, we must not give any indication of possessing magic or ‘the force’ from within us. We would be required to instruct the body in these matters so that there is no hint of such false impressions.

However, we should also avoid the false teaching that it doesn’t matter what you are doing with your body – only that you are ‘doing it in your heart’. This is the tendency of the gnosticism that has quietly crept into the church today. It would be prudent in offering a benediction to do so with solid instruction as to what a benediction is and what it isn’t, and to follow the biblical patterns of how the benediction was performed.

The purpose of this paper is not to command that we must have a benediction in the conclusion of the worship service. Rather, it is an attempt to open our eyes to see the prudence and privilege in receiving this blessing. And so we do not teach that a benediction is required necessarily, but that it is a glorious opportunity for the covenant people of God in the service of worship. Handled properly, the congregation will be blessed, and God will be glorified.