



BENEDICTIONS

A Pocket Resource



ROBERT I. VASHOLZ

CHRISTIAN
FOCUS





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Abbreviations

TH *Trinity Hymnal* Revised Edition, Fifth Printing, 1995. Great Commission Publications, Atlanta, Philadelphia
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10 9 8 7 6 5 4 3 2 1

ISBN 1-84550-230-2
ISBN 978-1-84550-230-0

Published in 2007
by
Christian Focus Publications,
Geanies House, Fearn, Tain, Ross-shire,
IV20 1TW, Scotland, UK

www.christianfocus.com

Cover design by Danie Van Straaten

Printed and bound by Bercker, Germany

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PREFACE

The word benediction derives from two Latin words that mean 'to speak well of'. Benedictions are pronounced by ministers at the close of worship services as an expression of hope and encouragement to God's people to face whatever their future might hold. They are a reminder of a good and great God, Who is rich in mercy, Who is not only for them but with them in whatever trials may befall their course in life. It has been my experience, that God's people look earnestly and intently for a final word of divine well-wishing from God through His ministers.

The motivation for this work rose from the general practice by ministers of using only three or four of the same benedictions all the time. While these three or four are superb, it occurred to me that the Scriptures are replete in their well wishing for a divine blessing for the people of God. Once I began to realize this, it seems that almost everywhere I read in Scripture, both in the Old and New Testaments, a hope of blessing for the flock of God appears. What follows then is a number of them for the minister to make the most of, to offer not only a welcomed variety, but for the sake of enhancing the beauty of God's blessings. But it is not only the Scriptures that proffer so much in this regard,



but Scripture truth enhanced by poetic expression in so many of our beloved hymns. For this reason, I have included not only benedictions residing in the Scriptures only (1–53), but benedictions as well that combine Scripture with some of the beautiful phraseology found in cherished hymns (54–109).

I am grateful for my colleague, friend and esteemed church historian David B. Calhoun for contributing a brief history of the benediction. We were both surprised at how very little has been written on this topic. Surprised, because it has been a part of worship for so many generations. Indeed, it has its roots in the oldest part of the Old Testament. Numbers 6:24-27, 'The LORD bless you and keep you; the LORD make his face shine upon you and be gracious to you; the LORD turn his face toward you and give you peace. So they will put my name on the Israelites, and I will bless them.'



Robert I. Vasholz





INTRODUCTION

John Calvin's *Form of Church Prayers for Geneva* (1542) directs that the Aaronic 'blessing' of Numbers 6:24-26 be spoken by the minister 'at the departure of the people, according to our Lord's appointment.' The rubric grounds the liturgical practice in the example of Christ at his ascension, when 'he led [the disciples] out as far as Bethany, and lifting up his hands he blessed them' (Luke 24:50). Luther suggested that it was the benediction of Numbers 6:24-26 (or 'something of this kind') that Jesus used on that occasion:

The Lord bless you and keep you.
The Lord make his face to shine upon you and be
gracious unto you.
The Lord lift up his countenance upon you and give
you peace.

The Reformers found in the Aaronic benediction a profound statement of what the blessing of God means: the promise of grace and peace and the light of God's countenance shining upon his people.

Benedictions, such as the one in Numbers 6, were used in the worship of the synagogue. The central prayer





of the synagogue was the *Amida* or the Prayer of Eighteen Benedictions. Each of the petitions and intercessions of the *Amida* ends with a benediction or thanksgiving. For example, the sixth benediction is a prayer for forgiveness: 'Forgive us, our Father; for we have sinned; pardon us, our King, for we have transgressed, for thou art good and forgiving.' This prayer concludes with a sentence that, properly speaking, is the benediction: 'Blessed be thou, O God, who art gracious and dost abundantly forgive.' The synagogue liturgy ended with the Aaronic benediction of Numbers 6.

The prayers of the early church bear the marks of the liturgical mold of the synagogue. The Epistle of Clement, written in Rome at the end of the first century, includes a long prayer with similarities to the *Amida* or Synagogue Prayer. Clement's prayer, which probably reflects the features of the public prayers of the church in Rome at that time, ends with an elaborate benediction:



Now may God, the all-seeing, and the master of spirits, and the Lord of all flesh, who chose the Lord Jesus Christ, and us through him for 'a peculiar people,' give unto every soul that is called after his glorious and holy name, faith, fear, peace, patience and long suffering, self-control, purity, sobriety, that they may be well pleasing to his name through our high priest and guardian, Jesus Christ, through whom be to him glory and majesty, might and honour, both now and to all eternity. Amen.

Benedictions or blessings served various purposes in the later Catholic church. There were benedictions, or 'sacramentals,' as they were called, for the blessing





of persons (at ordinations and installations), things (churches, houses, fields, and even animals), and materials used in worship (oil, candles, baptismal water, and wedding rings). These benedictions were connected with exorcisms – the latter breaking demonic influence and the former cleansing and blessing by divine power. It was believed that the power to bless resided in the church and in the minister giving the benediction.

The Reformers objected to these ideas and practices. Only persons, not things, are to be blessed with God's Spirit and grace. And it is only God who effectively blesses; all human blessing is intercession with God for his blessing.

Johann Gerhard, seventeenth-century Lutheran theologian, explained:



The [Old Testament] priests blessed by praying for good things; God blessed by bestowing the good things. Their blessing was votive, his effective. God promises to confirm this sacerdotal blessing on condition that it is given according to his word and will.



The Reformers noted that the benedictions of the Bible were more than the traditional way of parting; they were prayers of intercession. Furthermore, they were prayers of intercession by a messenger (such as Aaron, Melchizedek, Balaam, and Simeon) sent by God to proclaim that God had indeed granted the blessing promised in the benediction. The benediction was more than a general prayer of intercession; it was concerned with that spiritual blessing that God gave to Abraham





and to his seed forever. That blessing was handed down from generation to generation in the temple and, later, in the church. In Christ Jesus 'the blessing of Abraham' had come to the Gentiles, wrote Paul in Galatians 3:14. Calvin explained that the benediction is God's word in a special sense; it is a proclamation of grace, spoken by God's ministers, by the power of God's Spirit, and received by the people by faith. More than a prayer, it is a sermon. According to Calvin, the blessing God gives is himself.

'By the time of the Reformation,' writes Hughes Oliphant Old, 'the restored benediction [at the end of the service] became an obvious feature of Protestant worship.' Luther's *German Mass* (1526) concludes with the words 'God's Spirit and grace be with us all.' After the sermon in Zwingli's *Zurich Liturgy* (1525) is the prayer 'Almighty, eternal God! Forgive us our sin and lead us to everlasting life, through Jesus Christ our Lord.' Concluding Zwingli's service of the Lord's Supper are the words 'We give thee thanks, O Lord, for all thy gifts and blessings: thou who livest and reignest, God for ever and ever.' Martin Bucer's *Strassburg Liturgy* (1539) ends with the Aaronic benediction followed by the words 'Depart! The Spirit of the Lord go with you unto eternal life!' As noted above, Calvin's *Form of Church Prayers* (1542) concludes with the benediction of Numbers 6:24-26. *The Book of Common Prayer* (1552) directs that the priest or bishop dismiss the people with the words 'The peace of God, which passeth all understanding, keep your hearts and minds in the knowledge and love of God, and of his Son, Jesus Christ our Lord; and the blessing of God





Almighty, the Father, the Son, and the Holy Ghost, be among you, and remain with you always.' John Knox's *Form of Prayers* (1556) instructs the minister to end the service with the benediction of Numbers 6:24-26 or 2 Corinthians 13:14 ('The grace of our Lord Jesus Christ, the love of God, and the communion of the Holy Ghost, be with you all'). *The Middleburg Liturgy* of the English Puritans (1586) follows Knox's liturgy at this point. *The Westminster Directory* (1644) instructs the minister to dismiss the congregation 'with a solemn blessing,' but does not give any specific examples. Richard Baxter's *Savoy Liturgy* (1661) concludes 'with this, or the like,' blessing: 'Now the God of peace, which brought again from the dead our Lord Jesus Christ, that great Shepherd of the sheep, through the blood of the everlasting covenant, make you perfect in every good work to do his will, working in you that which is well pleasing in his sight, through Jesus Christ; to whom be glory for ever and ever.' John Wesley's *Sunday Service of the Methodists in North America* (1784) has the elder using these words to end the service: 'May the God of peace, which passeth all understanding, keep your hearts and minds in the knowledge and love of God and of his Son, Jesus Christ our Lord; and the blessing of God Almighty, the Father, the Son, and the Holy Ghost, be amongst you and remain with you always.'

Many of the Reformation liturgies and those of Irish and Scottish Presbyterianism preserved the dismissal at the conclusion of worship services. In his book *O Come, Let Us Worship*, Robert G. Rayburn taught that 'a few words of dismissal reminding the people of the challenge



to serve Christ and to live for Him in this dark world of sin are of real value. ... Such a word as “Go in peace and serve the living God in a world of strife and turmoil” will remind each listener that his worship of God should have prepared for him a richer experience of witnessing for God in the everyday world.’ The words of dismissal are followed by the benediction, Rayburn states, for the people should not be sent forth to serve in their own strength. He explains that ‘they must ever be dismissed in the name of the Lord with the assurance of the power and presence of the Triune God to accompany them always.’

The gesture that accompanied the benediction in Reformed services was not the sign of the cross, as in Catholicism, but the lifting up of his hands by the minister. It is a gesture of reception, a symbol of God’s mercies coming down upon the congregation. The minister receives and passes on to the people the blessing of the presence of God and the peace that God gives. Terry Johnson writes: ‘There is considerable disagreement as to the nature of the benediction. Is it a pronouncement, spoken to the congregation with head uplifted and eyes opened, or is it a prayer, prayed with head bowed and eyes closed? ... In either case, arms should be uplifted as the blessing of God is called down from heaven.’

There are many benedictions in the Scriptures. Rayburn insisted that ‘a minister should not make up his own when the inspiration of the Holy Spirit has made available ample words of benediction so that there need be no repetitive use of the same one or two.’



In this book Robert Vasholz has collected many of the Bible's benedictions and constructed other scripture-enriched blessings for the use of ministers who lead worship. Indeed all Christians will be 'blessed' by reading and praying these wonderful words from God, such as:

The Lord bless you and keep you.

The Lord make his face to shine upon you and be gracious unto you.

The Lord lift up his countenance upon you and give you peace.

David B Calhoun
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BENEDICTION **001**

May the One who makes the crocus burst into
bloom,
Who makes the lame leap like a deer
And the mute tongue shout for joy

Grant you the power together with all of the saints,
to grasp how wide and long and high and deep is the
love of Christ that surpasses all knowledge.



Scripture References

Isaiah 35:1, 6

Ephesians 3:18, 19

