



## Benediction

There is a vast difference between *dismissing* people at the end of the worship service and *sending* people back into the world. What makes the difference is the fading art of the apt benediction.

One of the strengths of the Evangelical Covenant Church is that we value worship but we don't dictate a particular style. In the Covenant you will find everything from rock and roll in a windowless warehouse to sacred music on a pipe organ with the sun streaming through gorgeous stained-glass windows in a soaring sanctuary. I have experienced the transcendent presence of God throughout the Covenant in various styles, spaces, languages, orders, and features. If God is who we claim God to be, then all manner of form, expression, and dimension is needed to express the outpouring of the human heart in praise, confession, lament, and supplication.

Even so, I feel something is lacking when a service ends with a casual "see you next week." The underlying message is we've finished what we've come to do. But it misses this opportunity: to bolster us in what we are then sent to do.

A benediction pivots our mind-set from the coming in to the going out. It reminds us that while we have gathered to be with God, God is altogether with us in the dispersing as well. It sends us out with reminders that give hope, challenge, and comfort as we then turn to live in and serve the world.

The word *benediction* comes from Latin. It means "blessing." Its compound root is literally "to say good."

While a blessing at the end of a service can come from many sources, including being crafted for that particular day, I have a personal bias toward those found in Scripture, if only to let God have the final unfiltered word of the day.

There are some twenty identified benedictions in Scripture. One of the most commonly used from the Old Testament is the Aaronic Blessing, so named because Aaron is instructed to bless the people with these words: "The LORD bless you and keep you; the LORD make his face shine on you and be gracious to you; the LORD turn his face toward you and give you peace" (Numbers 6:24-27, TNIV). There is

nourishing substance in each phrase.

From the New Testament, Paul's blessing rooted in the Triune God in 2 Corinthians 13:14 is often pronounced: "May the grace of the Lord Jesus Christ, and the love of God, and the fellowship of the Holy Spirit be with you all" (TNIV). Each clause carries sustenance for the soul.

My favorite is from Jude as he closes his letter by combining a blessing for the reader with words of praise to God: "To him who is able to keep you from stumbling and to present you before his glorious presence without fault and with great joy—to the only God our Savior be glory, majesty, power and authority, through Jesus Christ our Lord, before all ages, now and forevermore! Amen" (vv. 24-25, TNIV).

Those words fill me with assurance. Today God can keep me from stumbling. But even when I do, as I know I will, tomorrow God will still accept me as blameless through Jesus. As we are reminded of those twin truths, we go forth secure in God's unwavering companionship. No wonder Jude then bursts forth with a resplendent doxology of praise and gratitude.

An apt benediction changes "you're free to leave" into "be encouraged as you go." Instead of "we're done now," a final blessing reminds us that "God isn't."

Below are additional select examples of scriptural benedictions. Set aside some time this August when the pace just might slow down a tad, and linger over these passages for yourself. But more than that, there is plenty of discouragement around. Who is in need of a good word in your circle? Bless others by speaking these truths into their lives. Rest assured, they will appreciate your ministering to them in that way more than you will know.

*For further reflection: Hebrews 13:20-21; 1 Corinthians 15:58; Psalm 121:7-8; 2 Thessalonians 2:16-17; Philippians 4:7; 2 Corinthians 9:8; Matthew 5:3-11.* ■

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