

# Pastoring by Blessing

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St Paul knew that he was a bearer of blessing, the full blessing of Christ. So when he wrote his letter to announce his impending visit to Rome, he made this audacious claim: 'I know that when I come to you, I will come in the full measure of the blessing of Christ' (Rom 15:29). He came to Rome with the fullness of Christ's blessing to deliver it fully to the Christians there. And not just to them! At the beginning and end of each letter that he wrote, he blesses its recipients in the name of Jesus.

Like Paul, all ministers of Christ come to people with the full measure of Christ's blessing. Already now in this present age they hand on heavenly blessings to God's people on earth, the blessings of the age to come.

Yet that is not how they are usually perceived and received. When a pastor comes to visit them, most people expect him to make demands on them, or, if they are lucky, to relieve them of the demands that burden them. But they do not regard them as bearers of Christ's blessing! Even pastors do not usually see themselves in that role!

It seems to me that despite all the work that has been done on pastoral care over the last century, little attention has been given to the practice of blessing as an important part of pastoral work.<sup>1</sup> That is rather surprising, given frequent use of benedictions in our orders of worship and pastoral rites<sup>2</sup> and the work of Biblical exegetes such as Claus Westermann.<sup>3</sup> Since pastors do not value blessing, they all too often do not bless people who long to be blessed. And when they do bless people by using the

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<sup>1</sup> There are two exceptions to this among Lutheran theologians: Peter Brunner, 'Der Segen als dogmatisches und liturgisches Problem,' *Pro Ecclesia: Gesammelte Aufsätze zur domatischen Theologie* 2, Lutherisches Verlagshaus: Berlin and Hamburg, 1996, 339-351, and Ulrich Heckel, *Der Segen im Neuen Testament*, WUNT 150, Mohr Siebeck, 2002. Much of what follows builds on their careful work.

<sup>2</sup> For a summary of what constitutes a rite of blessing, see the LCA Commission on Worship statement 3: *the difference between rites of blessing and rites of consecration*, <http://www.lca/worship/statements.cfm>

<sup>3</sup> Claus Westermann, *Blessing in the Bible and the life of the church*. Tr Keith Crim. Fortress Press: Philadelphia, 1978. See also Christopher Wright Mitchell, *The meaning of BRK "to bless" in the Old Testament*, SBLDS 95, Scholars Press: Atlanta, Georgia, 1987

given orders for worship and pastoral care, they do so in a perfunctory way, without really understanding what they are doing.<sup>4</sup>

In recent times the issue of blessing has risen in a number of ways. People who have little or no church affiliation commonly refer to something good as a blessing to them. President Semmler regularly blesses us with the dominical greeting: 'The Lord be with you.' We now regularly bless children who come to Holy Communion with their parents. The Faith Inkubators course encourages parents and children to bless each other. Increasingly pastors are asked to bless haunted houses. Most controversially, some churches bless homosexual partnerships.

It is true that all Christians are called to receive blessing from the triune God and to pass it on to others in their station and vocation.<sup>5</sup> As co-priests with Christ they too can bless others in the church, in their families and in their circle of acquaintances.<sup>6</sup> That deserves more consideration as a topic in its own right, but it is not my focus here today. Instead, I would like to explore blessing as a part of pastoral ministry.

A benediction does not, as is often supposed, give God's acceptance of someone or His approval of some thing. By its performance God enlivens and empowers His creatures; he provides good gifts for them and empowers them to work with Him.

Like the Aaronic priests in the Old Testament, pastors are authorised to bless people in the divine service and in pastoral care. Blessing belongs to the ministry of the gospel, the stewardship of God's grace (Eph 3:2). Like the performance of an absolution, the performance of benediction is part of their office in which they do the work of God the Father together with Jesus here on earth (Matt 16:19). As agents of Christ pastors pass on heavenly blessings from God the Father with the Holy Spirit to the saints on earth (Eph 1:3). They do not just deliver his blessing by preaching, baptising and celebrating the Lord's Supper, but also by speaking benedictions.<sup>7</sup>

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<sup>4</sup> My own interest in this topic results from working on the production of *Church rites* (David Schubert ed, Openbook: Adelaide, 1994) and *Rites and resources for pastoral care* (David Schubert ed, Openbook: Adelaide, 1998). This paper gives the rationale for the use of blessings in those rites and for the specific rites of blessing given on pages 186-203 of *Rites and resources for pastoral care*.

<sup>5</sup> See Luke 6:27-28; Rom 12:14; 1 Pet 3:9.

<sup>6</sup> They do this most obviously by greeting them with explicit blessings, such as 'God bless!' or with an implied blessings such as 'Good day!'

<sup>7</sup> While most Lutherans agree that since Christ did not explicitly institute the enactment of benediction, the act of blessing people in the name of the triune God is not a sacrament. Some, however, argue that it is a sacramental act (Eberhard Stauffer, 'Zur sakramentalen Bedeutung des kirchlichen Segens,' *Viva Vox Evangelii: FS Hans Meiser*, Claudius: Munich, 1951, 324-334; Dorothea Greiner, *Segen und Segnen: Eine systematische Grundbelegung*, Kohlhammer: Stuttgart, 1998, 317-334; Reinhard Meßner, 'Sakramentalien,' *Theologische Reallexikon* 29, Walter de Gruyter, 1998, 648-663). I would prefer to understand a pastoral blessing, like the sermon or an absolution, as an enactment of the gospel.

That, in fact, may be one of the best ways of preaching the gospel to the present generation which is suspicious of words but values simple ritual gestures.

## **1. How does God give His blessing?**

The Scriptures teach that strictly speaking the Lord alone is to be blessed.<sup>8</sup> Since the living God is the source and giver of every blessing in heaven and earth, He alone is to be acknowledged as truly blessed. All blessings come from Him. They are His property, supernatural gifts, divine powers that create, protect, and foster life. Yet even though they belong to God, He does not keep them to Himself; He delegates them for delivery to His creatures. He delegates them in such a way that He does not relinquish them, but oversees their operation according to His providence.

Well how does this happen?

First of all, God the Creator appointed some creatures to be agents of His blessing in the order of creation. Genesis 1 tells us how He blessed three sets of creatures in three domains – the fish in the sea, the birds in the sky, and people on the earth (Gen 1:22, 28). By blessing them He gave them the capacity to procreate and flourish within their own ecological niche. In addition to this, He authorised humans to care for the earth as its stewards and to rule over the animals in these three domains.

When Adam and Eve fell into sin, God did not, as we might expect, withdraw that blessing from them. Instead, He worked with His blessing to bring good out of evil and sustain life in the face of death. Then and now God's blessing is the power for procreation and growth, vitality and energy, prosperity and health, good government and protection from evil in the order of creation. In that arena God's blessing operates according to His law for the benefit of all humanity and every living creature on earth.<sup>9</sup>

In keeping with God's law those who have received God's blessing can pass it on by blessing others. Parents may bless their children (Gen 27:28-29, 39; 48:15-16). Leaders in a community may bless a couple at their wedding (Gen 21:60; Ruth 4:11-12). Kings may bless their people (Gen 14:18-20; 2 Sam 6:18; 1 Kgs 8:55-61). People may greet another people with a blessing on meeting them (Gen 47:7; Ruth 2:4; 1 Sam 13:10; 15:13; 2 Kings 4:29) or leaving them (Gen 24:60; 28:3-4; 31:55; 47:10; 2 Sam 19:39).

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<sup>8</sup> Luke 1:68; Rom 1:25; 9:5; 2 Cor 1:3; 11:31; Eph 1:3; 1 Pet 1:3.

<sup>9</sup> The reception of God's blessing in the order of creation is contingent on the observance of God's law (Deut 7:12-16; 11:27; 15:4-6; 28:2-6; 30:16), civil righteousness (Ps 5:12; 24:3-5; 112:2; Prov 3:33; 10:6; 11:11; 24:25).

Second, in the order of redemption God authorises his priests to bless His people in His name. In the Old Testament this happened within the divine service at the temple in Jerusalem. God promised that he would come to his people in order to bless them there (Exod 20:24). He therefore authorised the priests to bless the congregation from in front of the altar, at the conclusion of the service, by using the so-called Aaronic benediction (Num 5:22-23; cf. Lev 9:23; Deut 10:8; 21:5; 1 Chron 22:13; 2 Chron 30:27).<sup>10</sup> The priests were to use his holy name, the LORD, to bless the assembled congregation.<sup>11</sup> In fact, God promised that He Himself would bless the people through their performance of that benediction (Num 5:23). Since they stood before the LORD and in his very presence, they passed on His gifts to the Israelites: His blessing and His protection from evil powers, His approval and His grace, His attention and His peace. By their performance of that benediction God conveyed His gifts to His people, the gifts that He had promised to give them.<sup>12</sup>

In the New Testament Jesus is the new great high priest who brings heavenly blessings to his disciples here on earth. Since he is the Messiah he is the giver of blessing (Luke 1:42; 13:35; 19:38).<sup>13</sup> Luke emphasises this most vividly. His gospel begins with the story of the priest Zechariah who was unable to bless the people at the temple, and it ends by telling us how the risen Lord Jesus blessed his disciples as he was being taken up into the heavenly realm.<sup>14</sup> This is what Luke says:

*Then Jesus led them as far as Bethany, and, lifting up his hands, he blessed them. While he was blessing them, he withdrew from them and was carried up into heaven.*

Here Luke sums up the New Testament teaching on blessing. Since the risen and ascended Lord Jesus is now no longer bound by time and space, he serves as the

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<sup>10</sup> For helpful discussions on the nature and significance of this benediction, see Klaus Seybold, *Der aaronische Segen: Studien zu Numeri 6/22-27*, Neukirchener Verlag: Neukirchen-Vluyn, 1977, and Patrick D. Miller, 'The Blessing of God. An Interpretation of Numbers 6:22-27,' *Interpretation* 29 (1975): 240-251.

<sup>11</sup> While pagan people used idols of their gods as lucky charms and amulets to ward off evil, God gave his name to the Israelites to replace these idols and bring His blessing to his people (Deut 6:4-9; 11:8-21).

<sup>12</sup> Seybold (*Der aaronische Segen: Studien zu Numeri 6/22-27*, Neukirchener Verlag: Neukirchen-Vluyn, 1977) provides a discerning analysis of this carefully constructed liturgical text for the rite by which the Lord gives three pairs of gifts to the assembled congregation. The first item of each pair deals with his personal engagement with them in the divine service by greeting them, looking at them with approval, and paying close attention to them, while the second item of each pair covers the results of his engagement with protection from evil powers, access to his grace in prayer, and the establishment of a peaceful environment for them.

<sup>13</sup> Note how this is in fulfilment of Psalm 118:26.

<sup>14</sup> See Claus Westermann, *Blessing in the Bible and the life of the church*. Tr Keith Crim. Fortress Press: Philadelphia, 1978, 86-89; Eduard Schweizer, *The good news according to Luke*, SPCK: London, 1984, 378; Andrews George Mekkattukunnel, *The priestly blessing of the risen Lord: an exegetico-theological analysis of Luke 24:50-53*, Peter Lang: Bern, 2001; Ulrich Heckel, *Der Segen im Neuen Testament*, WUNT 150, Mohr Siebeck, 2002, 77-93.

new high priest for all humanity, bringing blessings from the heavenly sanctuary to his disciples whenever and wherever they gather together for the divine service. He therefore fulfils God's promise to Abraham that through his seed all families on earth would be blessed (Gen 22:18; 26:4; Ps 72:17; Jer 4:1-2; Acts 3:24-26). His ascension marks the beginning of the new age, the Messianic age of blessing in which all God's people are blessed.<sup>15</sup>

In Galatians 3:6-14 Paul delves deeper into that mystery. The curse that had hung over all people, Jews and gentiles alike, for their failure to observe God's law, has now been removed for those who are united with Christ in baptism. Even though he was the sinless, blessed Messiah, Jesus became a curse for all people, so that all believers could receive the blessing that God promised to Abraham, the blessing of the Holy Spirit. The Holy Spirit is supreme blessing in the new age, for the Spirit brings all other heavenly blessings.<sup>16</sup> In Ephesians 1:3 Paul says: *Blessed be the God and Father of our Lord Jesus Christ, who has blessed us in Christ with every spiritual blessing in the heavenly places.* Through the risen and ascended Messiah God the Father now blesses all the saints with the Holy Spirit and every spiritual gift that is available in the heavenly realms. No blessings are withheld; all are now available for those who are united with Christ.

Thus in the new age, the Messianic age, blessing involves all three persons of the Holy Trinity. The Father gives His heavenly blessings through the Son by the Holy Spirit in the church. Like Zion, the city of God in the Old Testament,<sup>17</sup> the church, is now God's chosen place of blessing (Matt 16:18-19; Heb 12:14-24).<sup>18</sup> In contrast with the earthly blessings that are given and received according to the God's law in the order of creation, in the order of redemption those heavenly blessings, the powers of the age to come, are given through the gospel and received through faith in Christ. As co-heirs with God's Son, the sons of God receive them as their

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<sup>15</sup> This theme needs to be understood in the light of the Old Testament. Just as David and his successors were bearers of God's blessing, so the Messiah would be blessed and bring blessing to Israel and the nations (Ps 21:3, 6; 45:2; 72:14; 144:9-15; Isa 61:1-11; Ezek 35:26). In the Messianic age all God's people would receive the blessing of God's Spirit (Isa 44:3) and Jerusalem would be established as a place of blessing within the new heavens and new earth (Isa 132:13-18; Isa 65:23; cf. Jer 31:23).

<sup>16</sup> Since the risen Lord Jesus gave the Holy Spirit to the apostles, they and their successors could give the Holy Spirit by the laying on of hands with a benediction to other baptised Christians (Acts 8:17; 9:17; 19:6) and to other ministers of the gospel at their ordination (1 Tim 4:14; 2 Tim 1:6-7). So too, in its *Church rites* (David Schubert, ed., Openbook Publishers: Adelaide, 1994), the Lutheran Church of Australia provides such benedictions for baptism (9,10), confirmation (27,28), ordination (141), and the installation of church councillors (158), teachers (164), servers at communion (174), elders (187), pastoral carers (192), lay workers (196), and congregational officers (198).

<sup>17</sup> See Ps 24:5; 118:26; 128:5; 132:15; 133:3; 134:3; 147:13; Jer 31:23.

<sup>18</sup> The 'better word' that the risen Lord speaks from heaven to earth in the divine service (Heb 12:24-25) is the word of blessing that is the birthright of the faithful (Heb 12:15-17), his word of grace to them (Heb 12:15, 28).

heavenly inheritance (Acts 3:25; Heb 6:4-12; 12:17; 1 Pet 3:9). They are given in the name of Jesus and received by those who put their trust in him (Gal 3:8, 14).

And that is most helpful for us! When God blesses people, He does not just approve of them and affirm what is good in them as humans do when they bless;<sup>19</sup> rather, through Jesus Christ God actually equips them with His good gifts, so that they can do His will; by blessing them He produces what is pleasing in His sight (Heb 13:21). His blessing empowers them to do what pleases Him.

## 2. How can pastors bless others?

The performance of blessing is primarily a verbal act.<sup>20</sup> Thus God blesses by speaking his creative word either as a command (eg. Gen 1:22, 28) or a declaration (eg. Gen 12:2-3; Mal 2:19). People likewise bless others by speaking blessing to them. When humans bless, they wish others well; they wish what God wishes for them.<sup>21</sup> Yet blessing is much more than mere wish; it is a speech act, a performative utterance that does what it says.<sup>22</sup> Benedictions enact blessing; they make blessing happen; they communicate God's blessing.<sup>23</sup>

Since benedictions convey blessing, they are quite rightly accompanied by appropriate gestures to indicate that God's blessing is actually given, gestures such as the raising of hands in a sign of mediation,<sup>24</sup> or the laying on of hands on the head of a person as a gesture of sign of bestowal.<sup>25</sup> These gestures also show that blessing is given physically to the whole person and received by the whole person - body, soul, and spirit. Making the sign of the cross at the mention of Christ's name

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<sup>19</sup> In recent times God's blessing is commonly understood psychologically as His unconditional acceptance, approval, and affirmation. A good example of this approach is found in Gary Smalley and John Trent, *The blessing*, Thomas Nelson: Nashville, 1986.

<sup>20</sup> Thus in Greek the verb for blessing is εὐλογεῖν, well-speaking, speaking a good word.

<sup>21</sup> A jussive is therefore used in Hebrew for the formulation of a benediction, while a subjunctive is used in Greek. This creates some difficulties for us in English, because the subjunctive has become largely obsolete in modern usage and the occurrence of 'may/might' does not usually mark a statement as a performative utterance. Modern English tends to use the first person singular present tense for performative utterances, like 'I baptise you' or 'I bless you.'

<sup>22</sup> See Christopher Wright Mitchell, *The meaning of BRK "to bless" in the Old Testament*, SBLDS 95, Scholars Press: Atlanta, Georgia, 1987, 174-176, and Ulrich Heckel, *Der Segen im Neuen Testament*, WUNT 150, Mohr Siebeck, 2002, 260-280.

<sup>23</sup> Luther seems to be the first exegete to attempt to define this in his commentary on Genesis (*LW* 5, 140-142). He compares the speaking of blessings to the performance of an absolution and describes blessing as 'God's works through our ministry' (141), effective words that 'actually bestow and bring what the words say' (140).

<sup>24</sup> Lev 9:22; Sirach 50:20; Luke 24:50.

<sup>25</sup> Gen 48:14-18; Num 27:13-23; Mark 10:16; Acts 8:17; 19:6; 1 Tim 4:14; 2 Tim 1:6-7.

places his holy name as a brand on people; it also indicates that the blessing is gained by Christ through his death on the cross.<sup>26</sup>

Unlike a spell in magic, the power of blessing, however, does not depend on the use of the right formula. It depends on the right use of God's word. God's word, the holy gospel, is the source of its power. A pastoral blessing enacts the gospel. Blessing gives a person or group of people what God has promised to give to them. It fulfils God's promises.

So a pastor may turn any promise into a benediction. Thus, for example, in Matthew 28:20 the risen Lord Jesus declared that he would be with his disciples to the close of the age. A pastor may enact that promise by saying: 'The Lord be with you' or 'The grace of our Lord Jesus be with you.' Take another case! Jesus not only promised that he would give his peace to his disciples when he took leave of them on the night before his crucifixion (John 14:27); on Easter Sunday, for the first time in his ministry, he greeted them with the words: 'Peace be with you' (Luke 24:36; John 20:21, 26). In the Lord's Supper a pastor enacts that promise together with the risen Lord Jesus by saying: 'The peace of the Lord be with you always.' Pastoral blessing then speaks God's word as gospel for another person. It enacts the gospel.

While any divine promise can be turned into a Christological or Trinitarian benediction, the simplest way of blessing people is by using a scriptural version, such as the apostolic benediction: 'The grace of our Lord Jesus Christ, and the love of God, and the fellowship of the Holy Spirit, be with you all.' Our western liturgical tradition also provides us with another Trinitarian benediction: 'The blessing of Almighty God, Father, Son, and Holy Spirit, be with you always.' The problem with the use of this last formula and other similar benedictions in pastoral care is that they are too general. The best way to make a general blessing, like this, more specific is by introducing it with a relevant scriptural promise. We see Paul doing this in Romans 15:20. There he says: 'The God of peace will soon crush Satan under your feet.' Then he adds: 'The grace of our Lord Jesus be with you.' So, for example, if I wanted to bless people who were grieving at the death of a close relative, I could say: 'Blessed are those who mourn, for they will be comforted,' before I gave the Aaronic benediction or any other benediction to them.

Like an absolution, a blessing should not be given willy-nilly. A minister of the word can only bless those whom God has promised to bless. A blessing cannot contradict God's word. So, for example, I may bless a couple at their wedding, even if both of them are not baptised believers, provided that their marriage is in keeping with God's law. But I have no authority to bless a same sex union because it contradicts God's

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<sup>26</sup> The Greek letter *chi* which refers to Christ is shaped like a cross. There may be an allusion to the ancient custom of signing people with a cross at baptism in 2 Cor 1:21-22.

law. Since blessing enacts God's word, the authority to bless includes the responsibility to withhold blessing from whatever is contrary to God's word.

The power to bless also involves the right use of God's holy name.<sup>27</sup> In the Old Testament priests were commissioned to bless the congregation by using God's proper name, YHWH, the LORD.<sup>28</sup> So too the church uses God's proper name in its blessings! In the New Testament the apostles used God's triune name in their benedictions. How they did it varied from case to case. Most frequently, they blessed by naming Jesus as 'Lord' or as 'Christ.'<sup>29</sup> They also blessed by naming both 'God the Father and the Lord Jesus Christ.'<sup>30</sup> On a few occasions they blessed by naming 'the Father' (Col 1:2) or 'the God of peace.'<sup>31</sup> Once in 2 Corinthians 13:14 Paul names all three persons of the Trinity in the Apostolic Benediction.<sup>32</sup>

Like the apostles, pastors bless people in God's name. They use the triune name of God to bless their people. Since the blessing of God the Father comes through Jesus in the new age, they, most commonly, bless either in the name of Jesus or in the name of the Holy Trinity. Both the Apostles Creed and the Nicene Creed tell how to name God in performing benedictions. Since God's blessing is conveyed by the right use of his name, pastors should take care not to abuse His blessing by using other names, such as World Spirit or Mother God, to bless the faithful. That violates the second commandment, the only one that includes a threat of divine judgment.

So then, the authority to bless the congregation in the name of Jesus comes with ordination into the ministry of the gospel. By their ordination pastors are commissioned to use the keys together with the risen Lord Jesus by giving or withholding the Father's blessing. As stewards of God's grace they have the authority to use God's word and His holy name to bless the family of God.

### **3. When and where do pastors bless?**

The authority to bless is given according to a person's station and vocation. So while parents have the authority to bless their children, pastors are called to bless their congregation in the divine service and its members in pastoral care.

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<sup>27</sup> For an analysis of the nature and use of God's holy name in the Old Testament, see John W. Kleinig, 'What's the use of naming God?' *Lutheran Theological Journal* 26/1 (1992): 27-32.

<sup>28</sup> This explains what is meant by blessing in the name of the Lord (Deut 10:8; 21:5; 1 Chron 23:13; Ps 129:8) and why the Israelites acknowledged the Lord's name as their source of blessing by blessing it (Ps 72:19; 96:2; 100:4; 103:1; 113:2; 145:1, 21; 149:3; Neh 9:5).

<sup>29</sup> Rom 16:20; 1 Cor 16:23; Gal 6:18; Phil 4:23; 1 Thess 3:13; 5:28; 2 Thess 3:5, 16, 18; 2 Tim 4:22; Rev 22:21.

<sup>30</sup> Rom 1:7; 1 Cor 1:3; 2 Cor 1:2; Gal 1:3; Eph 1:2; 6:23; Phil 1:2; 1 Thess 3:13; 2 Thess 1:2; 2:16; 1 Tim 1:2; 2 Tim 1:2; Tit 1:4; Philemon 3, 25.

<sup>31</sup> Rom 15:33; 1 Thess 5:23; Heb 13:20-21.

<sup>32</sup> Another Trinitarian benediction is found in Rev 1:4-5 where 'the seven spirits' probably refers to the sevenfold Holy Spirit.



The main place for the enactment of God's blessing is in the divine service. That's where people can be certain of receiving it for themselves and their vocation. Often the members of the church are more aware of its significance than pastors. This came home to me rather dramatically some years ago when I led a seminar on worship. I was surprised to discover that some people valued it more than any other part of the service. In fact, one woman claimed that she did not know how she could get through each week without receiving a blessing every Sunday.

While blessings are given in every congregational service, they occur most frequently in the traditional Service with Communion.<sup>33</sup> There the pastor ministers to the congregation with six different acts of blessing. Each of these has a different function in its location.<sup>34</sup>

The first act of blessing is the dominical greeting: *The Lord be with you* with the response *And also with you*. This begins the Service of the Word. This greeting is, in fact, so significant that it occurs three times in the service – before the prayer of the day, at the beginning of the communion liturgy, and before the prayer after communion. It not only echoes the words of the angel Gabriel to Mary by which she became pregnant<sup>35</sup>; it actually enacts the promise of the risen Lord Jesus to be with his disciples to the close of the age (Matt 28:20). This greeting announces the presence of Jesus and gives his assistance to the congregation as its divine liturgist to lead it in its prayer to God the Father.

The second act of blessing is the apostolic greeting spoken by the pastor before the sermon: *Grace and peace to you from God our Father and the Lord Jesus Christ*. Paul's use of this blessing at the beginning of his letters shows that he used it regularly to introduce the sermon in the divine service. It follows his claim to be speaking to his hearers as an apostle. So when pastors join with Paul in speaking this apostolic greeting, they bring royal grace and peace from God the Father to those who are sons and co-heirs with Jesus Christ. That too is the function of preaching. By preaching God's word pastors deliver divine grace and peace to their hearers.

The third act of blessing is spoken at the end of the sermon: *The peace of God, which passes all understanding, keep your hearts and minds in Christ Jesus*.<sup>36</sup> This blessing provides protection, the protection of the conscience and the mind of God's people, from the accusation and condemnation of Satan. It envisages Jesus as a

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<sup>33</sup> The enactment of blessing features prominently in the rites that are included in regular services, such as baptisms and confirmations, ordinations and installations, reception into membership and farewell of members, as well as occasional services, such as anniversaries, weddings and funerals.

<sup>34</sup> For much of what follows see Kurt Frör, 'Salutationen, Benedictionen, Amen,' *Leiturgia: Handbuch des evangelischen Gottesdienstes 2/5*, Johannes Stauda: Kassel, 1955, 569-596.

<sup>35</sup> See Luther's remarks in LW 36:341.

<sup>36</sup> Note how this enacts the promise in Phil 4:7.

safe place, a place of spiritual refuge for the conscience. So every sermon is meant to bring its hearers into that sanctuary as it prepares them to receive the sacrament.

The fourth act of blessing delivers the greeting of the risen Lord with the words: *The peace of the Lord be with you always*. Coming as it does after the words of consecration, it accompanies the distribution of Christ's body and blood, for through them God the Father makes peace with the communicants and equips them to go out into his world as merciful peacemakers.

The fifth act of blessing is the dismissal after the reception of communion: *The body of our Lord Jesus Christ and his precious blood strengthen and preserve you in body and soul to life eternal. Go in peace*. This dismissal, which echoes Paul's words in 1 Corinthians 10:15-17, uses the blessed body<sup>37</sup> and life-giving blood of Jesus as means of blessing<sup>38</sup> to empower and sustain the faithful, physically and spiritually, on their earthly journey to their heavenly home. The emphasis in this dismissal is on bodily health and sustenance from these healing gifts, gifts that convey the Holy Spirit and all Christ's blessings to us.<sup>39</sup>

The final culminating act of blessing is the Aaronic Benediction. This is the only divinely instituted benediction in the Scriptures. It prepares those who have shared in Christ's holiness for holy service in the world, and it equips them with all that they need to please God as they work with Him in their vocational location.<sup>40</sup> A scriptural admonition, or a charge, may be added before it is spoken, to commission them for service, equipped and empowered by God's blessing.<sup>41</sup> The Aaronic Benediction puts God's name on them and in their hearts, so that they can carry the triune God with them bodily in their daily lives and bring His blessing to the people that they meet there. They become living shrines for the triune God.

So much for the performance of blessing in the divine service! The enactment of blessing is also vital to the pastoral care of people. It is, I hold, a basic form of pastoral care. So, whether I visit a sick person in hospital, or care for a dying person, or counsel a perplexed person in my office, I aim to bless them. Every other aspect of pastoral care, such as instruction, or absolution, or advice, is built around that. My default position, if you like, is the delivery of blessing with an appropriate

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<sup>37</sup> Luke emphasises this by reporting that when Jesus instituted his holy supper, he 'blessed' the bread (Luke 22:17; cf. 9:16; 24:30).

<sup>38</sup> Hence Paul refers to the wine as 'the cup of blessing.'

<sup>39</sup> Thus in the Large Catechism 5:68 Luther teaches that the sacrament is 'a pure wholesome, soothing medicine that aids you and gives life in both soul and body.'

<sup>40</sup> The benediction in Hebrews 13:20-21 makes this quite explicit.

<sup>41</sup> See LCA Commission on Worship statement 39: *the use of scriptural sentences in the divine service*, <http://www.lca/worship/statements.cfm>. This follows the precedent given in Rom 15:30-33; 2 Cor 13:11-14; 1 Thess 5:12-24; 2 Thess 2:15-17; 3:1-5; Heb 13:1-21.

benediction, even if that can only be done by making the sign of the cross over the person.

There is much that could be said on this, but I limit myself to three proposals. My first proposal has to do with home visitations. Some pastors are at a loss about what to do on such visits, which are so often an occasion for mutual discomfort and acute embarrassment. They give up visiting because it seems to be such a poor use of their precious time. Yet we all know how significant a pastoral visit can be for both parties. After all, Jesus promises that when a household receives a pastor, it receives Christ himself and the peace that he brings (Matt 10:12-13, 40; John 13:20). Traditionally, it used to be taken for granted that a pastor did not visit the homes of people to check up on them, or to ensure regular church attendance, but to pray for them and bless them. Like hospital visits, home visits work best when a pastor comes to bless those who live in it.

My second proposal is about the need to provide regular opportunities for people to receive a blessing. I saw this work best in Malaysia. At the end of every service some people would stay behind in church while the pastor greeted those who were leaving. Then after he had finished greeting them, he came back to the sanctuary and blessed people who were waiting in the church, either individually or in family groups, to receive a specific blessing. Why not do that in the LCA! If there is no time to bless people either before or after a service, a pastor could at least set aside other designated times for people to come to receive a blessing. That could also well provide a safe context for private confession and absolution, or intercessory prayer, or any kind of spiritual direction.

My third proposal has to do with the blessing of young people. Many of them do not just suffer lack proper personal attention from adults; they miss their father's blessing, his approval of them and affirmation of what is good in them. Even if they do not lack this kind of attention from parents and adults, they still respond powerfully to a blessing from a pastor as from God. I experienced the impact of such a pastoral benediction some years ago when a pastor blessed one of my children. So why not take the opportunities provided by a home visit, or confirmation instruction, or preparation for marriage, or any such occasion, to take young people aside and bless them by saying, *The grace of the Lord Jesus Christ be with you always?*

In sum: the ministry of the gospel delivers the blessing of Christ, his Spirit, to God's people, whether it be in the divine service or in pastoral care. It conveys God's gifts as free gifts communally and personally to people as they are ready to receive them.

#### **4. Conclusion**

In an intriguing theological reflection a German scholar called Steffensky argues that

blessing is a foundational gesture in both Judaism and Christianity.<sup>42</sup> Blessing acknowledges that since God is our creator, we do not need to fabricate life for ourselves and make something of ourselves by our performance. Instead, we receive everything from God. Blessing therefore enacts God's grace as something that we cannot achieve but only ever receive. When we bless we, like fountains, hand on to others what we do not ourselves possess, good things from God that we ourselves do not control. By blessing we live by God's grace and pass it on to others.

Since the triune God is rich in grace, giving richly to those who confess Jesus as their Lord (Rom 10:12-13), blessing is also the basic gesture of a pastor. Pastoral care delivers the full measure of Christ's blessing to believers and the blessing of the Creator to unbelievers. That, however, happens in a paradoxical way. Even though the ministers of the gospel are stewards of divine riches, they themselves do not possess what they pass on to others. Like beggars they themselves give only as they receive. Their capacity to bless comes through faith in God's promises and prayer for themselves and others.

The delivery of blessing relies on the grace of our Lord Jesus, who though he was rich, yet he became poor for us, so that through his poverty we might become rich with the Holy Spirit and all other spiritual blessings. It therefore operates under the cross. In 2 Corinthians 6:10 St Paul describes the stance of a person who blesses as 'sorrowful, yet always rejoicing; poor, yet making many rich; having nothing and yet possessing everything.' Such faithful people are rich in blessing (Prov 28:20) because they pass on the riches of God's grace.

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<sup>42</sup> Fulbert Steffensky, 'Segnen. Gedanken zu einer Geste,' *Pastoraltheologie* 82/1 (1993): 2-11.