

Blessings in Church Worship Even When You Don't Know the Language
Pastor Edward D. Seely, Ph.D.

On Sunday mornings I long to meet with and worship the triune God, who is Most Holy. I want to do so with his people in a sanctuary, a holy place, dedicated to meeting with him. The worship experience is most engaging, edifying, reinforcing, and satisfying if it includes architectural and other visual elements that graphically portray God's message through his Word. I want to be blessed, and even more, I want to be a blessing to God and to fellow believers in Jesus Christ; I also want to be further equipped for being a blessing to all others with whom I come into contact in the week ahead in order to be a more effective witness and servant for Christ as God works through me and his other people in the accomplishment of his redemptive purposes.*

Therefore, wherever in the world I am, I try to find a true church, people in Christ Jesus called to be holy who are worshiping Him who is not only holy but holy, holy, holy (Isaiah 6:3; Revelation 4:8) and faithfully proclaiming the Word of God. Yes, wherever in the world I am, *even if I don't know the language!*

Yet each time I've worshiped in another country where I can't understand much of what people are saying, I've observed that typically the order, or at least much of the content, of the service is familiar. Indeed, the liturgy of Christian worship all over the globe, in general includes much if not most of the same content, and often the sequence, whether the congregation is part of a highly liturgical tradition (e.g., Roman Catholic, Episcopalian, and some Lutheran) or whether it is an independent Protestant "free church" orientation (e.g., Pentecostal) that doesn't have a written order of service, but nevertheless still follows most of the essential traditional Christian practice in corporate public worship that the leaders have learned from the Bible, from churches somewhere else on the liturgical continuum, and/or from varying degrees of exposure to historic Christian systematic theology, a summary of the main teachings of the Bible by doctrine.

Such essentials include the awareness that Christian public worship is a dialogue between God and his people, beginning with him calling his people to worship. The dialogue typically continues with his people praising him in psalms, hymns, and spiritual songs (Colossians 3:16); confession of sin and, one of the main

* Notice how these blessings come through our actual presence in a church sanctuary dedicated to God. While watching a livestream or previously recorded worship service on TV, on a computer, or on another device can be a blessing for those who are ill, incapacitated, or for some other reason are truly unable to attend in person, electronic media are not an adequate substitute for, and cannot duplicate, worshiping God corporately with other brothers and sisters in Christ Jesus.

reasons driving my longing to be present: the immediate assurance from God's Word of pardon, forgiveness in Christ; the true proclamation of the Word of God from the Bible and in sacraments; responses in other psalms, hymns, and songs; prayers of the people, including the "Our Father" or "The Lord's Prayer;" a congregational profession of faith (usually in the form of one of the historic creeds in those churches in the more liturgical traditions); a concluding psalm, hymn, or song; and a sending (benediction) assuring his people that God goes with them to help them accomplish his purposes.

As I sit in worship even in countries where I don't know the language, I'm impressed how blessed I am worshiping with each congregation. I've worshiped with churches all across the Christian theological spectrum, and I've found this to be so in all churches that hold to the Bible as their highest authority and proclaim Christ as the obedient only begotten Son of God, Second Person of the trinity, crucified, risen, reigning, and returning. Let's think about some of the many ways such blessing occurs.

More Blessings We Can Receive

First of all, most of my international journeys have involved work on top of which are the normal stresses of travel. What peace and joy I observe I have in Christ as I have some time before the service begins to sit (or even stand as in Orthodox churches) and meditate, pray, and contemplate all I see surrounding me. These blessings are facilitated and compounded when the prelude music commences. I'm in God's house in his presence with his people, the very body of Christ! What relief! I can feel my whole body and soul beginning to relax—relaxing to the core of my being that God makes possible in his presence...in Immanuel! Relatedly, it's like I'm home. Indeed, in a very real sense I am home with my extended family, brothers and sisters in Christ, all of us having come home to meet with our Father. And I'm eager to greet and meet some of them after worship.

Such greeting after worship is a great blessing. In the uncommon communication with brothers and sisters in Christ, we can recognize and sense the presence of the Holy Spirit, e.g., in and through the warm welcome of other believers in the Lord, as were also able to do earlier in hearing and meditating on the faithful proclamation of the Word of God.

Your home church in which you are a member may recite the Nicene Creed at times if not regularly. I highly regard the statement that we believe in the "one, holy, catholic, and apostolic church." Our Roman Catholic brothers and sisters interpret some of those terms differently from fellow Protestants, but in worshiping with the global church, we can see and feel in a very profound and exciting way

how meaningful is our oneness in Christ with the church catholic, i.e., the universal or global church, not limited to but also including the Roman Catholic Church, in worship with whom I've been greatly blessed...many times.

While we're thinking about the excellent and very helpful Nicene Creed, we should keep in mind that it's best to use the original version, which thankfully most of the churches with whom I've worshiped around the world still do, rather than capitulate to the unwarranted American tendency to allow sociology, and many other "ologies" and "isms" to trump theology. Rather than give in to American narcissism we should keep the Nicene Creed's original use of the first-person plural. This isn't just my creed; it's the shared testimony of the body of Christ all over the world, the catholic church, which designation in the original creed should also be kept and proclaimed with vigor. The word "catholic" is a good word that too many congregations have allowed to be usurped by an unbiblical anti-Roman Catholic bias. In the attempt to placate that bias they have substituted "Christian" for "catholic" and in so doing have removed a vital and vibrant Biblical teaching and confession from the creed. "Christian" and "catholic" are not synonyms; catholic communicates that the church of Jesus Christ is not just a small insignificant local cult group that can be ignored, as many are trying to do. Christ's church is catholic, i.e., universal and global! And, thanks be to God, it is growing!

As already indicated briefly, the art and architecture of the sanctuary (and elsewhere in the church building) speaks volumes in a language we all understand, especially since it typically formulates Biblical events and teaching. In historic, especially liturgical churches with traditional architecture, we can reflect on the rich and profound significance and meaning of the architectural symbols such as the communion table, baptismal font, pulpit, and stained glass windows with their Scriptural scenes. Gothic churches and cathedrals powerfully and dramatically draw our vision heavenward and strikingly impact our intelligence with the light streaming through the high and lofty openings whereby worshipers clearly sense the symbolism pointing to our triune God, and in particular Jesus Christ, the Light of the world coming from heaven to connect them with God. These church buildings took centuries to build, so their architecture blends the styles of subsequent generations of thought, which also enrich our worship.

Whenever you can, don't miss the opportunity to experience the rich and powerful impact of Eastern Orthodox theology and architecture by worshiping under the traditional dome with the Christ Pantocrator icon prominently fixed on the center of the dome at its highest point, signifying that God has placed all things under his feet. (Psalm 8:6; 1 Corinthians 15:27; Ephesians 1:22) Pantocrator means Ruler of

All or Almighty Ruler. What he is doing with his hands indicates that he is coming again to judge and to have mercy on and bless his people. His left hand holding the Bible indicates that the whole Bible points to and is about him, who is the living Word of God and the Second Person of the trinity, symbolized by his right hand's first two fingers (index finger and middle finger) above his ring and little fingers forming a circle with his thumb (Three in One). The Orthodox worship service, is called the Divine Liturgy (> Gk. *liturgia*, common work), indicates that through worship the congregation is participating in the Lord's work. The liturgy facilitates a profound dialogue with God in, under, and through the Christ Pantocrator, whereby the church militant on earth engages in worshipping God with the church triumphant in heaven, symbolized by the dome over the congregation. Our brothers and sisters in Christ in the Eastern Orthodox churches have noticed and emphasize certain aspects of Biblical teaching and its implications that many of us in the West have either overlooked or decided not to emphasize, to the impoverishment of our maturity in Christ. We can correct that neglect by worshipping with our Orthodox family members in the faith.

In the prayers offered we not only have the precious experience of communing with God where we can be a blessing, as we'll reflect on further below, but we can receive many blessings as we rejoice in conversing with God and realize that he is hearing our praises, thanksgivings, and supplications in addition to our prayer of confession we offered earlier in the service that was immediately followed by the assurance of our pardon. A special joy occurs in the liturgical churches as the incense from the censor rises heavenward, powerfully engaging our olfactory, visual, and auditory senses that recall to our minds and hearts, the assurance that our prayers and the prayers of the other saints among us are valued greatly by God. (Revelation 5:8)

Music lifts our spirits. Many times the churches in another nation will sing a familiar hymn, psalm, or spiritual song that we sing in our country, sometimes even more than one familiar selection. I recall not a few times singing a hymn or a more contemporary song in English, alongside the other worshipers who are singing it in their language, while tears of joy stream down my cheeks and neck while praising the Lord Jesus Christ, indeed the whole triune God, as I contemplate the reality that I'm experiencing a foretaste of the ecstatic pleasure we'll have worshipping him in the new heaven and new earth as part of the great multitude from every nation, tribe, people and language! (Revelation 7:9) I'm also reenergized by the dynamic and vibrant singing so characteristic of God's people in other cultures! In Africa during times of singing the congregation worships with their whole body and soul as their heart-felt expression of joy emerges into holy dancing, not at all a romantic or uncontrolled exhibit, and not at all a performance

of only one or a few, but a holistic expression of virtually all the people in their worship of God, their bodies as well as their souls responding to the Biblical message. What joy that must give God as he observes his people whom he has created and given the new birth, responding to his Word with their whole being as he has given them the capacity to do in their creation. The contagion of enthusiasm even motivated a few miniscule moves from me, nothing like my fellow African brothers and sisters, but enough to express joy in a new and exciting way! Oh yes; it was a blessing!

Especially in those congregations whose worship is more contemporary, many clap during some of the songs. Clapping along with others as they sing and clap during a spiritual song in worship is another way to engage, even enthusiastically, in worship with the people of God.

Since we never worship in a vacuum, doing so in the geopolitical context can heighten and intensify the experience and broaden our perspective. For just one example, a colleague and I were singing in English “This Is My Father’s World” and “Blest Be the Tie that Binds” together with Russian Christians, who were singing in Russian, during the Cold War. Talk about a blessing! Indeed! And one far greater than sleeping-in back at the hotel and far superior to even the best sightseeing available.

Many churches, especially liturgical ones, include sung and spoken words from the Bible and historic liturgical expressions that are familiar to us, and we can repeat them with the congregation, thus engaging us even more with our brothers and sisters in Christ with whom we are worshiping and most of all with God the focus of our worship. Such words are Hebrew and Greek expressions that are not translated in the Bible, such as Hallelujah! and Greek liturgical invocations such as the *Kyrie Eleison* (*Kyrie Eleison, Christe Eleison, Kyrie Eleison*: Lord have mercy, Christ have mercy, Lord have mercy).

For Western Christians worshiping in another country in the Western hemisphere, the language itself gives many clues. For example, English is based on the Greek, Latin, German, and French languages. When we hear in worship the word pax, our study of history reminds us of the Pax Romana, that period under Roman rule which brought about peace (pax in Latin). So prior to the distribution of the elements of the Lord’s Supper when we hear the pastor say “Pax Domini” (from the Latin word for Lord), and especially with hand raised with the palm toward the congregation, we sense that we are receiving the peace of the Lord. What greater sense of peace can we have but the assurance that we have peace with God forever in and through the Lord Jesus Christ?! While we are on the subject of the Lord’s

Supper (also called the Eucharist and/or Holy Communion), in all churches you are visiting, it is important to ask if Communion is served to only members of that congregation or the denomination of which it is a part. Many churches still today take very seriously the Biblical teaching to protect themselves and others from eating the bread or drinking the cup of the Lord in an unworthy manner and bringing judgment on themselves (1 Corinthians 11:27-32), so they don't practice open communion as do other churches who leave that matter between the communicant and God. To avoid embarrassment and other problems, check first before partaking, but in either case you will be blessed just being there!

Even if we are worshiping in a church which practices a closed communion, we can still feel blessed, for we know that the Lord's Supper is for all his people throughout the whole world. We can rejoice that we are in a part of the body of Christ that takes his Word seriously. As we watch the congregation partaking of the elements of the Lord's Supper, or Eucharist (which means thanksgiving in reference to 1 Corinthians 11:24), our gratitude to Christ and the whole triune God (the other two Persons as well who also suffered greatly during Christ Jesus' passion) powerfully emerges and explodes out of our hearts and minds as we participate, even only as observers, "in remembrance of [him]." As part of the celebration we are also "proclaiming the Lord's death until he comes." (Luke 22:19; 1 Corinthians 11:23-26)

Throughout the service we should observe carefully all that is going on so we can learn from our brothers and sisters in Christ how we might function more effectively in our worship, for example in how to help children engage most effectively in their worship of God. I've observed God's people do so exceptionally well in many countries, for example in China and in Africa, the latter in worship services lasting almost three hours.

The above blessings are all enhanced when worshiping next to someone who knows both the language of the country in which we are worshiping and English. I've always found such people more than willing to help me know what we are doing at a certain point in the service. He or she can be very helpful in informing us, for example, of what Scripture passage is being read, thus enabling us to follow along in our English translation. Sometimes we can figure out what passage is being read by looking at a bulletin, worship folder, or projection screen. We need to be sensitive, however, to not ask too many questions of the person sitting next to us so that we don't interfere with his or her worship.

Regarding the sermon, or homily, we can learn a lot from the pastor's nonverbal communication through the tone of his or her voice and the gestures he or she uses.

In most churches I've visited we've been blessed with pastors who deliver their homily strongly and with palpable conviction. Hearing such messages, even without the ability to understand the words, elicits encouragement, strengthening, motivation, and rededication to serve God obediently and faithfully in, and as a result of being in, the presence of the strong and enthusiastic proclamation of God's Word. Accordingly we also are blessed with the unmistakable reaffirmation, thousands of miles from where we live, of the importance and obedient living out of Christ's Great Commission, to proclaim God's Word in and make disciples of all nations and to the end of the earth. (Matthew 28:19; Acts 1:8) This reaffirmation surges to the forefront of our consciousness as we hear the Word proclaimed strongly, as it often is in other countries of the world. The enthusiasm of the pastor delivering the sermon is unmistakable, is greatly uplifting, and releases a surge of encouragement, as does the liturgist and others leading the service.

The benediction is an uplifting and encouraging part of the service. When the pastor holds his or her hand or hands up high, with palms facing outward, we can tell that we are receiving God's promise to go with us, providing for us, guiding us, and protecting us, including and most importantly spiritually, as we leave to go our separate ways and engage the world in the high and holy calling he has given us and for which he has further equipped us in the dialogue we've just had with him in his worship. Wow! In your worship can you sense being in the presence of and more strongly connected to the triune God who is most holy as well as loving and gracious?

After the worship service I've had many informative conversations with such a person who then explained key points the pastor made in the sermon and other elements of the service, why the congregation does what it does in its worship, the history of the congregation and its building, and other aspects of the church's life and work, locally and globally. I remember a conversation in this vein with a delightful young couple in Beijing. They were newlyweds, and he had been baptized the preceding Easter. Younger people often know English and want to practice speaking it with someone who speaks English as his or her native language.

Spanish, derived from the Latin base, has heavily influenced English. Those of us who have studied and speak Spanish, can figure out the root words of many terms we hear in a worship service in another, especially Western language. I studied Spanish and German many years ago. I was just beginning to think in Spanish and had achieved a minimal fluency, and then over half a century intervened when I had few opportunities to speak or listen to Spanish. Yet, still today, I can make out

many Spanish and German words and their derivatives that I hear or see in print while attending worship in another country that has been influenced by those languages.

Blessings We Can Give

We can first bless God by worshiping him, including thanking him for redeeming his creation at such huge cost to himself in the most wonderful demonstration of love ever, as he has done in and through Jesus Christ, who credits to us his righteousness by our faith and as we thank him for the forgiveness of our sinfulness and sins that enables us to be in communion with God. We can also bless him by expressing appreciation for his creation of so many different people, including the different races, for their beauty and uniqueness as they, too, bear God's image and enrich our lives in Christ. We bless God by showing love toward his people, our brothers and sisters in Christ in the country in which we are worshiping.

Before the service begins, we should pray for the pastor, the musician(s), any liturgist, and any others who lead in worship, including the ushers. We can pray that God will help them do well carrying out their responsibilities facilitating the worship of his people and that they'll have peace, joy, and a sense of satisfaction in so doing. We can pray that they'll be alert to any needs that arise within the congregation, that anyone who needs special assistance will be observed and receive the help he or she requires. We can pray for the whole congregation, that we'll all be receptive to what God has to say to us and that we'll respond in ways that please him not only during this service of worship but in the coming week and throughout our lives.

We can tell when the congregation begins to pray and join in with them. We, too, can ask God to accept our praises and thanksgiving and grant the supplications being made for those for whom the congregation is praying. We can pray for the pastor and ask God to recall to his or her mind the needs that should be brought to the throne of God. We can also pray for that congregation, for the country we are visiting, and for our own country, including the request that the Lord raises up from this congregation, or elsewhere in this country where we're worshiping, missionaries to come to our nation to help us extend and nurture God's kingdom throughout the United States. At this time we can offer our own specific praises, thanksgivings, and supplications including for our family and home church. At the end we can say "Amen!" with our fellow worshipers in Christ.

We can pray for the pastor prior to the homily that God gives him or her the words he or she should speak that the congregation needs to hear. During the Bible

reading, and the homily where that Bible text is being explained and applied in another language, we can follow along in our English Bible, and if we have a study version (e.g., the *NIV Study Bible*) we can read and reflect on the notes on that passage. We can pray also that the Holy Spirit works in the minds and hearts of all of us in the congregation, helping us to pay attention to God's Word we're reading and hearing explained and applied, and about which we are thinking, and that we all function accordingly in faithful obedience to all aspects of his calling in our daily lives.

The offering is a means of participating in God's worship. As we give our money we can in a small, but significant, way express thanksgiving to God for the much greater and sublime ways he has blessed his people, including us. The offering is also a means whereby we worshipers can bless many others as God in turn gives this money to the church to engage and accomplish the work to which he is calling that congregation to do locally, regionally, and globally. When we think about what we're doing by participating in the offering, our perspective is enlarged and an exciting awareness emerges regarding our calling, purpose, and fulfillment which extends far beyond ourselves in life, indeed, that has eternal dimensions!

We can affirm and encourage members of the church with whom we're speaking after the service (those who speak English of course) as we express our appreciation for being with them in our worship of the Lord and for being able to do so in the context of their church building and all it has to offer and for the kindnesses the congregation has offered us. We can bless the pastor by greeting and thanking him or her after the service.

By giving these blessings we receive a blessing. Typically these new friends in the Lord respond very warmly and graciously in many ways.

There is one other way to be blessed and to be a blessing in a country where you don't know the language of that country. As a reader of this article in its English version, you understand English; thus, recall when abroad that you can many times find worship services in English. This occurrence may be more readily evident in years to come as more people want to learn English as a second language.

So when you are traveling internationally and Sunday arrives, find a true church, one that faithfully proclaims and follows the Word of God, and join in God's worship. Reject the unwarranted assumption that you won't know what is going on in the church. As we've just seen there will be many ways for you to receive and be a blessing!