

I commend to you our sister Phoebe, a servant of the church at Cenchreae, that you may welcome her in the Lord in a way worthy of the saints, and help her in whatever she may need from you, for she has been a patron of many and of myself as well.

Greet Prisca and Aquila, my fellow workers in Christ Jesus, who risked their necks for my life, to whom not only I give thanks but all the churches of the Gentiles give thanks as well. Greet also the church in their house. Greet my beloved Epaenetus, who was the first convert to Christ in Asia. Greet Mary, who has worked hard for you. Greet Andronicus and Junia, my kinsmen and my fellow prisoners. They are well known to the apostles, and they were in Christ before me. Greet Ampliatus, my beloved in the Lord. Greet Urbanus, our fellow worker in Christ, and my beloved Stachys. Greet Apelles, who is approved in Christ. Greet those who belong to the family of Aristobulus. Greet my kinsman Herodion. Greet those in the Lord who belong to the family of Narcissus. Greet those workers in the Lord, Tryphaena and Tryphosa. Greet the beloved Persis, who has worked hard in the Lord. Greet Rufus, chosen in the Lord; also his mother, who has been a mother to me as well. Greet Asyncritus, Phlegon, Hermes, Patrobas, Hermas, and the brothers who are with them. Greet Philologus, Julia, Nereus and his sister, and Olympas, and all the saints who are with them. Greet one another with a holy kiss. All the churches of Christ greet you.

(Romans 16:1–16)

Introduction

Why do you attend church? Pew Research Center recently undertook a study to find out why people attend religious services. The top four answers were:

1. to become closer to God;
2. so children will have a moral foundation;
3. to make me a better person; and
4. for comfort in times of trouble or sorrow.

Why do *you* attend church? Melvin Newland quoted the following little ditty in a sermon he preached:

Some go to church to laugh and talk,
and some go there to walk.
Some go to church to meet a friend,
and some go there an hour to spend.

Some go to church to find a bride,
and some go there a fault to hide.
Some go to church to celebrate,
and some go there to agitate.
Some go to church to doze and nod,
but the wise go there to worship God.

Any good, Reformed Christian knows the answer to the question: We attend church to worship God.

But how do you *define* worship? Is worship lifting songs and prayers to God? Is worship giving our offerings to the Lord? Is worship listening to a sermon or observing the sacraments? These are all acts of worship, but each of them is a *vertical* act—an act directed by Christians toward God.

But if the word “worship” means to bow, and if worship is really all about bowing to God’s revealed will, then we must recognise that there is another element to worship—a horizontal element, which is expressed in the one another statements in the New Testament. The one another are instructions given by God to his people in the context of the local church. We obey the one another commands when we express them toward one another in the church, not in society in general. To obey the one another commands is to bow to God’s revealed will for the gathered church. Obedience to these commands is, therefore, an act of worship.

This interplay between the vertical and the horizontal elements of worship can be clearly seen in the record of the early church. Listen how Luke describes early church life: “And they devoted themselves to the apostles’ teaching [vertical] and the fellowship [horizontal], to the breaking of bread [horizontal] and the prayers [vertical]” (Acts 2:42). New Testament worship is about the way we approach God *and* the way we approach one another.

In recent weeks, we have been spending time on Sunday nights learning about the New Testament one another commands. The most frequent of these is the command to love one another. The second most frequent is to greet one another—a command that is consistently coupled with the language of a holy kiss (Romans 16:16; 1 Corinthians 16:20; 2 Corinthians 13:12; cf. 1 Peter 5:14).

In a recent study, we took some time to consider the command to greet one another with a holy kiss, as Paul exhorts in Romans 16:16. We spent most of our time examining what is meant by a holy kiss, but, in fact, the kiss is of secondary importance in this command. (It is not unimportant, but is of secondary importance.) The grammar that Paul employs in this verse shows that the command is actually to greet one another, and the kiss was

simply the way in which that would ordinarily happen. The method of greeting can differ from setting to setting, but the command to greet one another is of primary importance.

This fact is obvious even from a plain reading in English, without taking Greek tenses into account. The word “greet” is found sixteen times in vv. 1–15, long before the mention of the holy kiss.

The point is simple: The burden of the command is upon the greeting rather than the kiss. The kiss was the customary way to greet, and Paul simply told his readers to take the customary form of greeting and make it holy.

In this study, I want to return to Romans 16:1–16 and ask what it looks like to greet one another in a holy way. There are at least four things that we can say about a holy greeting from this command.

A Holy Greeting Commends

First, if our greetings are holy greetings, they will commend others: “I commend to you our sister Phoebe, a servant of the church at Cenchreae, that you may welcome her in the Lord in a way worthy of the saints, and help her in whatever she may need from you, for she has been a patron of many and of myself as well” (vv. 1–2).

Paul begins this chapter by greeting a woman who was an influential church member at a sister church in Cenchreae. She had been faithful in the Lord’s work and was worthy of respect. Paul was not embarrassed to openly and publicly commend her.

If we greet one another in a way that is holy, we will not be afraid to commend one another. We will be willing to express appreciation when others have been a blessing to us.

To commend others is not necessarily to rob God of glory that belongs to him alone. Paul would never divert glory that belongs to God alone to Phoebe, but he was unafraid to commend her as a servant of the Lord. In fact, this commendation served to highlight, rather than diminish, God’s glory.

Imagine, for a moment, that someone sees commendable behaviour in your children, and comments on it. “Your children are so respectful and well-behaved.” I don’t imagine that you, as a parent, would feel offended that that person is detracting from your hard work of childrearing and giving your children glory that they don’t deserve. You would understand that the compliment was in fact a guised compliment to you. That person would really be commending you for doing a good job raising your children.

When we commend our brothers and sisters for Christlike character, we do not rob God of glory that belongs to him alone. No, when we commend people for Christlike character and works, God ultimately receives the glory.

A Holy Greeting Acknowledges

A second characteristic of a holy greeting is that it acknowledges people.

Greet Prisca and Aquila, my fellow workers in Christ Jesus, who risked their necks for my life, to whom not only I give thanks but all the churches of the Gentiles give thanks as well. Greet also the church in their house. Greet my beloved Epaenetus, who was the first convert to Christ in Asia. Greet Mary, who has worked hard for you. Greet Andronicus and Junia, my kinsmen and my fellow prisoners. They are well known to the apostles, and they were in Christ before me. Greet Ampliatus, my beloved in the Lord. Greet Urbanus, our fellow worker in Christ, and my beloved Stachys. Greet Apelles, who is approved in Christ. Greet those who belong to the family of Aristobulus. Greet my kinsman Herodion. Greet those in the Lord who belong to the family of Narcissus. Greet those workers in the Lord, Tryphaena and Tryphosa. Greet the beloved Persis, who has worked hard in the Lord. Greet Rufus, chosen in the Lord; also his mother, who has been a mother to me as well. Greet Asyncritus, Phlegon, Hermes, Patrobas, Hermas, and the brothers who are with them. Greet Philologus, Julia, Nereus and his sister, and Olympas, and all the saints who are with them.

(Romans 16:3–15)

Notice the many names that Paul mentions in these verses. We saw last time that this list of names displays an astonishing array of diversity: men and women, slaves and aristocrats, wealthy and poor, Jew and Greek and Roman, etc. About half of the names here were either women or slaves. This is significant because it shows us that Paul was not name-dropping. He was not highlighting the many celebrity Christians with whom he was friends, but was greeting ordinary saints who were very dear to him. And he did so *by name*.

There is great power in remembering and greeting people by name. If I receive correspondence addressed to “Dear sir,” it does not feel very personal. If it is addressed to “Steward,” as is often the case, I can at least see that a modicum of effort was put in. “Stewart” is one step up. But when they get the name right, it shows that some personal effort was put into the greeting. (As an aside, it always seems strange to me that people will write and misspell “Stuart” [Steward] and “Duane” [Dwayne] without asking, but then will pause to ask how to spell my surname!)

When people remember your name, it indicates that they have some personal interest in you. We’ve all experienced that awkward moment when we recognise a face but can’t put

a name to it. Paul was a busy man, but he remembered saints he had met by name, and greeted them accordingly.

At the most basic level, do you remember names? Do you even try? Do you make the effort to show a degree of personalisation in greeting?

But the principle goes beyond simply remembering a name. A holy greeting implies a personal interest in the lives of others. Do you display such interest? Are you interested enough to not only remember a name, but remember whether that person is married or single, divorced or widowed? Did you know that that woman is a single mother? Do you know that that church member lost his job last week? Do you take a personal interest in the lives of your fellow church members? A holy greeting will dictate that you must.

In the digital age in which we live, people are little more than numbers—ID numbers, account numbers, student numbers, employee numbers. The church should be a place where members are more than just numbers.

A Holy Greeting Initiates

The third characteristic of a holy greeting is that it initiates: “Greet one another” (v. 16). “Greet” here is an active command verb, which implies that you are taking the initiative to greet. You are not waiting for others to greet you, but are actively greeting others.

Solomon urged, “A man who has friends must himself be friendly” (Proverbs 18:24, NKJV). Jesus rebuked the Pharisees who “love the best seat in the synagogues and greetings in the marketplaces” (Luke 11:43). They expected to be greeted. Paul tells the church to extend greetings rather than expecting greetings.

A holy greeting extends greeting before (or even without) receiving greeting. A holy greeting extends hospitality before (or even without) receiving hospitality. A holy greeting welcomes others at church before (or even without) being welcomed first. A holy greeting does not slip into the service at the last minute and out during the closing hymn. Holy greeters do not hide in the balcony and rush out before anyone can talk to them. Holy greeters move outside of their comfortable circle of friends to greet others who are not quite like them.

Do you complain that no one has invited you to their house for dinner when you haven't invited others? Do you come to church, immediately take your seat, and stare at your screen until the call to worship begins, or do you book your seat and then walk around greeting others? Do you notice visitors to the church and then extend a welcome to them? If the church took this command seriously, there would be no need for a welcome team!

A Holy Greeting Affects

Finally, a holy greeting is one that shows genuine affection: “Greet one another with a holy kiss” (v. 16b). I said that I would not focus on the kiss in this study, but I must stress, as I did in the previous study, that a kiss – romantic or otherwise – is an act of affection. A holy greeting is an affectionate greeting. It may not be a kiss in our context, but it could be a hug, or a warm handshake, or an arm around the shoulder. Whatever it looks like, a holy greeting must express genuine affection for others.

It is interesting to note that a kiss, by definition, involves touch. A holy greeting is one of touch. Touch is important in the Christian worldview, because unlike the gods of the pagans, the God of Christianity is a God who became human so that he could touch and be touched. Jesus reached out to touch those whom no other religious conservative would touch: lepers, children, tax collectors, women, etc.

Christianity is a religion of incarnation. It reaches out to those who are untouchable – addicts, prostitutes, the homeless, etc. – with the unselfish, gospel-centred love of Christ. We are so nervous in our day of inappropriate touching that we have lost our theology of touch. Let us embrace it afresh and become a church in which it is common to greet one another with a holy greeting.

Perhaps before you can do that, you need to receive the greeting that God extends to you in Christ. Perhaps you need to answer the call of the one who says, “Come to me, all labour and are heavy laden, and I will give you rest” (Matthew 11:28). Perhaps you need to heed this call: “The Spirit and the Bride say, ‘Come.’ And let the one who hears say, ‘Come.’ And let the one who is thirsty come; let the one who desires take the water of life without price” (Revelation 22:17). Receive Christ’s greeting in the gospel today, and then extend Christian greeting to one another as an act of worship in obedience to God.

If you do, then bow the knee to the God who came to be touched, and experience forgiveness and cleansing in the name of Christ today. And then go out and extend that same gospel love to others with a holy greeting.

AMEN