

Notes for the Ekklēsia Meeting

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Greet One Another

by Dan Trygg

“Greet one another with a holy kiss. All the churches of Christ greet you.”

“All the brethren greet you. Greet one another with a holy kiss.”

“Greet one another with a holy kiss. ¹³ All the saints greet you.”

“Greet all the brethren with a holy kiss.”

“Greet one another with a kiss of love. Peace be to you all who are in Christ.”

Romans 16:16

I Corinthians 16:20

II Corinthians 13:12

I Thessalonians 5:26

I Peter 5:14

Believe it or not, I have had numerous discussions with people over this command. Usually the focus is more on the prepositional phrase, “with a holy kiss”, than on the verb. People are bothered, or intrigued, by the method of greeting. The discussion centers on why we either should, or should not, follow this practice. People express their views, and then typically move on. There is little that has changed as a result of the discussion. Most of the time, it is just an intellectual curiosity that results in little encouragement or change. Well, under the Spirit’s leading, Paul wrote, “All scripture is inspired by God (lit., ‘God-breathed’) and is profitable for teaching, for reproof, for correction, for training in righteousness in order that the person of God might be proficient, being-fitted-out for every good work” (II Tim. 3:16,17). Maybe we ought to take a closer look at this “one-another action” which God felt was important enough to command us to do on behalf of one another, not once, not twice, but *five* times in the NT. If we did not simply intellectually debate and dismiss this admonition, but asked, “What is profitable in this command that is meant to teach me, to reprove or correct me, or to train me in becoming righteous?”, then maybe we could begin to perceive this in a way that would equip us for being more effective as followers of Christ, “equipped for every good work.”

OK, do I have your attention? **Remember, there are twenty-one different “one-another actions” that we are to express toward one another when we meet. These are designed to build community, by creating an environment where people are valued and encouraged. To “greet one another” should be the first on the list, because it should be the first thing we do as each person comes into the meeting.** The word for “greet” is the common Greek word for an expression of salutation or a warm act of welcome. It can describe the interaction when people come together, or when they depart. This word occurs 59 times in the NT. We are told to “greet” a house, when we enter it (Matt. 10:12). The word is used to describe a crowd running up to Jesus and “greeting Him” (Mk. 9:15). It was used of the cohort of Roman soldiers mocking Jesus, saying, “Hail, King of the Jews!” (Mk. 15:18). Mary came into the house of Zacharias and “greeted Elizabeth” (Lk. 1:40). When Jesus sent the 70 out, He told them not to greet or salute anyone along the way (Lk. 10:4). When Paul departed the boat he was traveling on in Caesarea, he went up and “greeted the church” in Jerusalem, and then departed for his home in Antioch (Acts 18:22). After the riot in Ephesus, Paul called the disciples together and “embraced them” (KJV), “took his leave of them” (NASB), or “said farewell to them” (ESV), depending on the translation of Acts 20:1. When his boat landed at Ptolemais, he “greeted the brethren and stayed with them one day” (Acts 21:7). In Jerusalem, he had the opportunity to meet with the elders of the church, “and greeting them, he related one by one the things God had done...” (Acts 21:19). In Acts 25:13, King Agrippa and Bernice arrived at Caesarea to “greet” (ESV), “salute” (KJV), “pay their respects to” (NASB) or “to welcome” (RSV) Festus, the new governor. The churches of Asia “sent greetings” to the believers of Corinth, as did Aquila and Priscilla and the church in their house (I Cor. 16:19). Paul instructs the Philippians to “greet every saint in Christ Jesus” and then tells them that “the brethren together with me greet you. All the saints greet you, especially the ones from Caesar’s household” (Phil. 4:21,22). Aristarchus and Mark sent greetings to the Colossians in Paul’s letter (Col. 4:10), as did Epaphras (vs. 12), Luke and Demas (vs. 14). Paul instructs them to pass along his greetings to the brethren in Laodicea, especially mentioning Nympha and the church in her house (Col. 4:15). That is only about one quarter of the occurrences in the NT, but **these examples help us to get an understanding of how the word was used, and how often “greetings” were expressed to friends, acquaintances or others** with whom you desired to show respect. I included some of the different translational choices of different versions to show you not only the possible options, but also to show that some translators seem to “push the limits” of the word options, for no apparent reason. For example, to say that Paul “embraced them” in Acts 20 has no supporting evidence in the text. He may very well have done that, but ...we *don’t* know! **If you were to follow the preponderance of word usage, it would seem that greetings mostly centered around verbal acknowledgment.** We see also how people were eager to send greetings to people by name, even including them in someone else’s letter. Part of this is due to the nature of sending communication in the first century. You usually had to employ a courier, or entrust the letter to the care of someone traveling to the city where you wanted your letter to go. When you made those arrangements, it was not unnatural that

others would want to add their greetings along with yours. **It was a momentous occasion to receive a letter, or be mentioned by name in a letter from some other part of the world.** An interesting study in this regard is to examine Romans 16. Over one third of all the uses of the word, “greet”, occurs in this one chapter (21 times)! He mentions *twenty-four individuals by name*, to whom he sends his greetings, *and three different home congregations* associated with them (cf. I Pet. 5:13; II Jn. 1:13; III Jn. 1:15). In addition, eight other people mentioned by name join in sending *their* greetings to the Roman church, adding their salutations after Paul finished his greetings.

What can we learn from all of this?

(1.) Being personally greeted can be a positive, edifying experience. If you put yourself in the shoes of someone mentioned by name in one of Paul’s letters, you can imagine how good it would feel to be personally greeted in this way, ...especially when the letter was read out loud in the group. It would make you feel important. It would certainly make you feel like you were significant to Paul, or whoever else may have written a letter. **Paul thought it was a valuable investment of his time and resources to mention so many individuals by name, in this way.** He could see how this practice was edifying to those he chose to single out in this way. The same is true in a face-to-face meeting. If you look someone in the eye and genuinely and warmly greet them, they feel like they are valued.

(2.) This practice helped to foster a sense of camaraderie and community among the early Christians. Personal greetings, or even group acknowledgements, reinforced the sense that we are all in this together. In spite of ethnic, national or cultural differences, the Christians had a bond that superceded all these natural human dividers. To call one another “brother” or “sister” created a sense of family that was the outward, tangible expression of the spiritual reality of what God had done in Christ. We *are* now members of God’s household (Eph. 2:19). He *is* our Father, and that makes us siblings. If we love Him, we should love one another (I Jn. 5:1).

(3.) Warmly expressing greetings, and showing personal interest in one another, provides a testimony to the unbelieving world that there is a unity, love and acceptance in Christ that they do not typically experience. Almost everyone has their “social group”, whether it be at a bar, associates from work, members of a sports team or a club, etc. The warmth, acceptance and genuine interest in others should be outstanding characteristics of Christian community. The greeting is the first taste of what the interaction could be like, so it must be a good reflection on what Christ-in-us can do for relationships.

(4.) Since church meetings were to be interactive, the greeting is kind of a “warm up” for everyone. It offers a safe, relatively easy way to begin to use our “output circuit” to express truth in love to one another. It helps us “get out of ourselves” and redirects our attention to the needs of others. It helps to break down the barriers that we tend to build up toward others. We are so used to going places where we are passive spectators. Developing the practice of greeting others when we meet helps to push us out of our bubble of isolation, and reach out to others.

What about the prepositional phrase, “with a holy kiss”? How are we to understand that? It is important to understand that **the employment of a kiss had a broader range of meaning and usage than is true in our culture today.** It was used in family relationships (e.g., between fathers and children -- Gen. 27:26,27; 31:28; 32:1; 48:10; 50:1; I Kg. 19:20; I Sam. 14:33; between brothers – Gen. 33:4; 45:15; Ex. 4:27; other relatives – Gen. 29:11,13; Ex. 18:7; Ruth 1:9,14; Sol. 8:1); as a sign of friendship and greeting (I Sam. 20:41; II Sam. 15:5; 19:39; 20:9; Lk. 7:45; Matt. 26:48); or to honor a king (I Sam. 10:1; Psa. 2:12); or as an act of homage to a god (I Kg. 19:18; Hos. 13:2); and also could have a sexual reference (Job 31:27; Prov. 7:13; Sol. 1:2). **A kiss of greeting was a very common and accepted method of welcoming someone in first century culture. What made the greeting between believers in a church setting unusual was not the method of expression, but the breaking of social barriers.** Jewish believers were kissing their Gentile brothers in Christ; the rich and powerful were willing to kiss those who were poor and despised by society. The NT word for “kiss” is *philēma*. It is derived from the Greek word for friendship love, *phileō*. The common word for “friend” is *philos*. So, **the word for “kiss” is associated more with the idea of friendship than with the action of the mouth, as our English word tends to be.** A Greek *philēma* could be a kiss on the cheek, mouth, hand, forehead or even the feet of the other person. **It was a sign of affection, not something that was thought of as primarily sensual in nature.** Nevertheless, every time Paul refers to it, he adds the qualifier “holy”, to make sure that no one would misunderstand or abuse the practice. Peter qualified it by calling it the “kiss of *agapē*”. It was not a kiss of erotic love, but a kiss of unselfish love, a love that comes from God.

We know from the writings of Justin Martyr that it was common in the second century meetings he attended, after the prayers and before the Lord’s supper, for everyone in the meeting to salute one another with a kiss (I Apol. 65.2). **It is clear from the context that this was a regular part of the gathering, a reminder that they were all brothers and sisters in Christ. The point is probably not the mode of expression, but the fact that everyone is made welcome, and that there is an unusual expression of equality and oneness.** Whether warm handshaking, embracing, or a holy kiss of God’s love, **we should openly and warmly express the love of Jesus to each other.**