

Greeting the Brethren

Xenophobia is the fear of strangers. The opposite of xenophobia is the biblical term “hospitality,” which is the translation of the Greek word PHILOXENIA, or literally “love of strangers.” Rather than fear strangers, we are called to love those who are unfamiliar to us (Romans 12:13; 1 Timothy 3:2; Titus 1:8; Hebrews 13:2; 1 Peter 4:9).

Most people have difficulty relating to those they do not know. We naturally are drawn to those who are most like us. This is why our family members are so close to us, we are comfortable around those who are similar and familiar to us. Yet the biblical injunction to “greet the brethren” is even more important for us to fulfill than our need to greet our family during the holidays. We should be just as conscientious about greeting our brothers and sisters in Christ as we are about greeting our mothers, fathers, brothers, sisters, aunts, uncles, cousins, and best friends.

Why is the biblical injunction to “greet the brethren” even more important than greeting our own family? We are not specifically commanded to greet the members of our biological family. You can search the Scriptures but you will not find such a command. But we are commanded to greet the members of our spiritual family:

- Romans 16:16 “Greet one another with a holy kiss. All the churches greet you.”
- 1 Corinthians 16:20 “All the brethren greet you. Greet one another with a holy kiss.”
- 2 Corinthians 13:12 “Greet one another with a holy kiss.”
- Philippians 4:21 “Greet every saint in Christ Jesus.”
- 1 Thessalonians 5:26 “Greet all the brethren with a holy kiss.”
- 1 Peter 5:14 “Greet one another with a kiss of love.”

When we come together whether it is in our small groups or in the larger context of the church worship service what does the Lord expect from us? He would expect that we would greet one another. Frequently people who have attended various churches will comment that “they sure weren’t very friendly.” Certainly there are people who have visited our fellowship that have expressed this very same sentiment. If our church would understand the teachings of the New Testament and would seek to be obedient to those teachings then this criticism would disappear. If our church would understand the teachings of the New Testament and would seek to be obedient to those teachings, then not only would certain criticisms disappear but it would unleash a very positive energy that would promote deeper fellowship and more effective outreach.

In the in the New Testament references above, each command was to “greet one another with a holy kiss.” This biblical command to “greet one another with a holy kiss” has very practical application for our lives and the life of this fellowship. It will enrich us personally, our church fellowship will be strengthened and even our impact on the world will be enhanced.

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What is the holy kiss?

When Americans read the biblical command to “greet one another with a holy kiss” the first thing that comes to mind is two people kissing each other on the lips. Therefore, because of our culture, we might find this thought of greeting one another with a holy kiss very uncomfortable.

The “kiss” has been common in the Middle East since patriarchal times. People would kiss a person’s cheek, beard, hands or feet as a token of affection, greeting or reverence and even the lips.

In the Old Testament record, kissing to show affection was predominantly practiced between individuals of the same sex (Genesis 29:13; 33:4; 45:15; Exodus 4:27; 18:7); and in a limited degree between those of the opposite sex (Genesis 29:11). However the writings of the early church indicate that the holy kiss was exchanged by members of both the same (cf. Apostolic Constitutions ii, 57:12) and opposite sex (vide Ambrose, Hexaem VI, ix, 68; Tertullian, Ad Uxor ii,4). Therefore when believers came together in early NT times it appears the brethren would greet one another, both men and women with a kiss on the cheek.

In order to apply this command to our church we must recognize that the emphasis is on the greeting. We are not commanded to kiss one another, but we are to greet one another. And at this particular place and time period the customary way of greeting one another was the kiss. Therefore, we should expect the writers to say, “greet one another with a holy kiss.” Today in our country, the holy kiss should be replaced by a culturally acceptable greeting of affection.

If these same writers were writing today in America, what might they say in light of our culture? They might say greet one another with a “Holy hello.” Or they might say greet one another with a “holy handshake.” “Greeting someone with a “hello” or a handshake is what is expected in our culture when we greet one another. In contrast, a kiss would communicate something very different.

Someone might say, “What about the holy hug?” The hug is more problematic. There is little risk in greeting the brethren with a “hello” or with a “handshake,” but there may be a moderate cultural risk in greeting one another with a hug. If you started greeting each person you saw at Valley Bible Church with a hug you would eventually cause someone to be offended, believe that you had become too familiar. 1 Corinthians 10:32 teaches us to “give no offense either to Jews or to Greeks or to the church of God.” 2 Corinthians 6:3 says give “no cause for offense in anything, in order that the ministry be not discredited.” When choosing to greet the brethren we must be careful to greet them in a way that will make them feel comfortable and not cause offense.

Does this mean that we cannot give out hugs? Of course not! It is a wonderful thing to receive a hug and the practice of giving hugs can be a very healthy expression of affection among the brethren. But we must exercise care. If you see a person giving hugs to men as well as to women then you can be fairly well assured that they would be comfortable receiving a hug. But if you have not seen this and are unsure you can always ask them. Beyond the hug is the kiss, and though at one time and place this would be a preferred expression of greeting, in our culture it is best to restrict this type of a greeting to family members. Demonstrating affection for one another in the church of Jesus Christ in our greetings is not an option. It is a command and it must be done carefully, not indiscriminately.

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What makes a greeting holy?

The word “Holy” (AGIOS) fundamentally signifies separated, hence in Scripture holy means being separated from sin and therefore consecrated to God. The greeting that we are to extend to the brethren must be holy, or in other words, separated from sin and consecrated to the Lord.

Someone might ask, “How could a greeting be anything other than holy? A greeting does not seem to be particularly vulnerable to expressions of sin.” Hopefully we would not be so naive. Here are a few biblical examples of greetings that were very unholy.

Jacob’s kiss of deception in Genesis 27

In Genesis, Jacob and Rebekah conspired to get the blessing of Isaac for Jacob. It is the blessing which Isaac intended for Esau. Jacob wanted the blessing of his father. He knew God had promised his mother that the elder would serve the younger; so the blessing was his already. However, he did not believe God and Rebekah, his mother, did not believe God. Evidently Isaac, the father, did not believe God or he would never have attempted to bypass Jacob and give the blessing to Esau. He followed his own feelings and appetite in contradiction to the distinct Word of God.

In the story, Esau was sent to the field to hunt for some game so that he might prepare a special meal for the very elderly and nearly blind Isaac. When he returned it was Isaac’s intent to give Esau a special blessing before he died. In order to thwart Isaac’s plan, Jacob, with Rebekah’s encouragement, concocted an elaborate plan of deceit where Jacob would represent himself as Esau. In the process of working out this plan Isaac became somewhat suspicious and asked Jacob to approach him and give him a kiss. Isaac wanted to get close enough to him so that even though he could not see he could smell his clothes to see if he in fact was Esau. Jacob did this. He gave his father a kiss and because he was wearing Esau’s clothes Isaac accepted Jacob’s lie. Immediately following the kiss Esau extended the blessing to Jacob. Jacob’s kiss was not a holy kiss. It was not separated from sin and consecrated to God. Jacob’s kiss was despicable.

Absalom’s kisses of alienation in 2 Samuel 15:1-6

In 2 Samuel 15:1-6 we see Absalom preparing himself to lead a rebellion against his father, David. He does this by stationing himself at the busiest gate of the city. When men with complaints came to the gate requiring justice, he listened to them with a great show of sympathy and affection. 2 Samuel 15:5 says, “And it happened that when a man came near to prostrate himself before him, he would put out his hand and take hold of him and kiss him.” The result was exactly what he intended it to be. He alienated the Jewish people from David and stole their hearts. 2 Samuel 15:6 says, “And in this manner Absalom dealt with all Israel who came to the king for judgment; so Absalom stole away the hearts of the men of Israel.” Absalom’s kisses were unholy. They were not separated from sin and consecrated to God.

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Judas kiss of betrayal in Matthew 26:47-49

What is particularly interesting about Judas “kiss” of Jesus is the fact that it appears not to be a simple kiss. Matthew does not choose to use the simple verb for “kiss” as he does in 26:48 but compounds it with a preposition 26:49 which communicates that Judas kissed Jesus frequently, eagerly and warmly. The kisses of Judas were unholy.

What was common in each of these three instances of the unholy kiss is that the kisses were self serving. Jacob extended his kiss to his father Isaac not to serve Isaac but to serve his own purposes. Absalom extended his kisses to the multitudes not to serve them but to serve himself. Judas extended his kisses to Christ not to serve Christ but to serve himself. We need to make sure that our greetings are focused not on what we want but rather on what others need.

Have you ever known believers who have been offended when they are not greeted? Do those believers who are offended possess a serving attitude or self-serving attitude? They clearly possess a self serving attitude. They look upon the whole greeting process as something that should serve them rather than as something that use to serve others. This spirit and attitude is unholy and the greetings that come out of it our unholy. A holy greeting is a greeting that is extended not in order to serve ourselves but rather in order to serve others.

Greeting one another is an expression of service

Greeting the brethren serves the Lord

It serves the Lord because it honors Him. How does greeting the brethren honor the Lord? We honor Him by doing what He has commanded. If we call Jesus “Lord” we need to honor him as Lord and do the things he has called us to do (Luke 6:46). He has called us through His apostles to greet one another and as we do this we honor Him.

We certainly want to honor the Lord at all times and in all ways we would be particular careful to honor him in a public forum. If one of our children disobeys us in the privacy of our home it would dishonor us but it would not be as grievous as if the disobedience were displayed publicly. This is exactly what is happening when we choose to not greet the brethren in our public gatherings. We are taking our disobedience and making it a public spectacle and dishonoring our Lord. This is not right and the Lord deserves to be treated better.

Greeting the brethren serves the brethren

It serves the brethren because it acknowledges the special relationship that we have with them as our brother and sisters in Christ (John 1:12). 1 John 5:1 says, “Whoever believes that Jesus is the Christ is born of God; and whoever loves the Father loves the child born of Him.”

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If we are a child of God, we have brothers and sisters in Christ who are gathering in our church each week and we should acknowledge the special relationship that we have with them in Christ. When we give them our “holy hello” or our “holy handshake,” or in certain cases a “holy hug,” we say that they are very special to us.

Greeting the brethren serves the world

It serves the world by helping them to identify us as the disciples of Christ and therefore as His channel of love to them. Jesus said in John 13:34-35 “A new commandment I give to you, that you love one another, even as I have loved you, that you also love one another. By this all men will know that you are My disciples, if you have love for one another.”

The disciples were to love one another as Christ loved them. If they did this, the world would be able to see them as the disciples of Christ. By seeing the love of the brethren for one another the unbelievers would see Christ’s love, which is a very powerful force in drawing men to the salvation in Christ.

Tertullian writes that the Roman government was disturbed about the early church. Christians were increasing in number by leaps and bounds. Because they wouldn’t take even a pinch of incense and put it before the image of the emperor, the Romans felt they might be disloyal. Spies went into the Christian gatherings and came back with a report something like this: “These Christians are very strange people. They meet together in an empty room to worship. They do not have images. They speak of One by the name of Jesus, who is absent, but whom they seem to be expecting at any time. And my, how they love Him and how they love one another.” If spies from an atheistic government came to our church to see whether Christianity is genuine, what would be their verdict? Would they go back to report how these Christians love each other?

How does greeting the brethren serve others? It serves the Lord because it honors Him. It serves our brother and sister in Christ because it acknowledges the special relationship they have with us in Christ. It serves the world because it identifies us as the disciples of Christ and the vehicle by which His love continues to flow not only to the church but into the world as well.

Application

Who have you greeted recently with a “hello” or with a “handshake?” If you are new to our church you might have not greeted anyone. Those who have attended for some length of time might have greeted all kinds of people. Were these people friends who happened to be brethren? Or were they brethren who some of them happened to be friends? The command is not to greet your friends who happen to be your brethren. Greet one another with a holy kiss refers to all brethren.

When we come into a fellowship of the brethren we should have a goal of greeting all the brethren. We are called by the Word of God to go beyond the greeting of our friends only. In the words of Jesus, "if you love those who love you, what reward have you? Do not even the tax-gatherers do the same? And if you greet your brothers only, what do you do more than others? Do not even the Gentiles do the same?" (Matthew 5:46-47).

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If you are a professing believer you should make sure that you have greeted the people around you in the fellowship, whether you know them or not. If you do not know them you can simply say, "Hello, My name is _____. Have you been attending the church long?" Or if you know them and have forgotten their name you can say them, "Good morning, I think that I know you but I have forgotten your name, could you tell me one more time?" Not to reach out to those brethren you do not know, who have come to worship with us is not only unfriendly, it is sin, for it fails to greet the brethren.

Beyond this step of greeting people who you happen to be sitting next to, you should go further. You should purpose yourself to greet the brethren who you may not know as you are putting your children in the nursery or in various Sunday School classes. Even consider leaving your house earlier than you normally leave with your family. Then you would have a greater opportunity to greet the brethren.

Most of us do not want to put ourselves in uncomfortable situations. We are sympathetic to the difficulty that a shy believer has in reaching out to another believer by extending a greeting. Yet just because the commands of Christ might be difficult does not mean that we are less responsible to fulfill them, as the Scriptures clearly command us to greet the brethren.

Conclusion

The very simple command appearing in many of our epistles "to greet one another with a holy kiss" should not be overlooked. We need to take it to heart. But even though the expression of our greeting might have changed over the past 2000 years. The responsibility that we have to greet all of the brethren has not changed.

The servants of Christ need to zealously press forward in this very challenging but profitable area of obedience. If we by the grace of God would purpose ourselves to do this we will be personally enriched, our church fellowship will be strengthened and our outreach to the world enhanced.