

Dear Friends,

As I've grown older, I come to appreciate the personal interactive culture of New Testament Christianity. Jesus sent the disciples out to bear witness to His coming two by two, not alone. Typically in Acts, preachers went in groups of two or more. Peter at the house of Cornelius and Philip to the eunuch are exceptions.

We miss much of this rich "Social" dimension of the New Testament gospel when we rapidly read through these closing greetings in the New Testament letters. They serve as a worthy and needed reminder. We need each other. In fact, we can't succeed in our Biblical faith apart from active involvement in this worshipping community that Scripture refers to as "Church."

If we practice the kind of relationship we see in these closing greetings, we will nurture a gentle, "Safe" relationship with other believers. I started my ministry in a location where my uncle was a respected elder. He was childhood friends with another respected preacher. These two men were true "Brothers" in the faith and in the ministry to the end. I've seen the invaluable blessing such a safe and nurturing relationship serves to the whole community of churches where that culture is exemplified and taught in the message and lives of pastors. Did they always agree? Most of the time, yes. And on the basic and major doctrines of the faith, absolutely yes. But they occasionally disagreed on the interpretation or application of a passage. The respectful grace they showed toward each other in those areas of their relationship blessed me immensely. I pray that example and lesson for you and for all the Lord's people.

### **Final Word—Always a Blessing**

**By Silvanus, a faithful brother unto you, as I suppose, I have written briefly, exhorting, and testifying that this is the true grace of God wherein ye stand. The church that is at Babylon, elected together with you, saluteth you; and so doth Marcus my son. Greet ye one another with a kiss of charity. Peace be with you all that are in Christ Jesus. Amen.** (1 Peter 5:12-14 KJV 1900)

We tend to read over these closing comments in New Testament letters as if they have no significance. Let's spend a few moments with Peter's closing thoughts.

**By Silvanus, a faithful brother unto you.** Peter doesn't specify Silvanus' contribution to his letter, but he lets his readers know that this "**Faithful brother unto you**" played some part in the writing of the letter. Commentaries often conclude that the persons named at the end of these letters were the author's "Stenographer." The named author dictated the letter, and the stenographer wrote the words.

We are too inclined to think that much of ministry is a "Solo" operation. Few activities involved in the edifying service of a church are solo. For example, during a sermon, how much mental and spiritual energy do you invest in the thoughts the speaker is teaching? How much eye contact do you give him? How much body language or facial expression that he might observe to know your response to his words? During any given sermon, two sermons or more in fact are preached. There

is the verbal sermon from the pulpit to the pew. But there is also one or more “Sermons” from the pews to the pulpit. A wise preacher will carefully observe his congregation and even interact with them in his message. Young preachers are often understandably nervous in the pulpit. Nerves tend to feed bad habits. The young preacher may not sense how the people are reacting and imagine that they don’t like what he is saying, so he will stop looking at them and form a habit of looking out the windows, at the back wall, the ceiling, or the floors. If he falls into this trap, he loses the invaluable benefit of true dynamic preaching in which both the preacher and the congregation are touched and encourage each other. Eye contact and responsive interaction makes any message so much more powerful, and gives it legs to become a message in the hearers’ lives. The sermon from the pew to the pulpit may have lingering benefits in the preacher’s life as well.

I love Peter’s description of Sylvanus, “**a faithful brother unto you.**” That information alone would give Peter’s first readers good reason to take his message to heart. Apparently, they knew Sylvanus and respected him as a faithful man. If Sylvanus engaged in this work, it must be a good work. I occasionally observe to our congregation that a preacher’s message can seldom, if ever, rise above his feet. The more the congregation confidently believes the preacher lives what he preaches the more they will take his message seriously.

“**brother.**” By this familial term, Peter highlights the respectful, “Brotherly” climate that Biblical Christian culture should foster. Although the habit of referring to other believers by the title, “Brother” or “Sister,” is common in our churches—and I have no objection to it—I personally prefer the New Testament practice of believers referring to each other by first names. However, we should always treat each other as brothers and sisters in a gracious, loving family. I’ve had too many experiences of people religiously referring to other believers by these titles but treating them with something quite less than “Brotherly” love and respect. The use of “Brother” as a title appears only once in the entire New Testament. (Acts 9:17 when Ananias first spoke the comforting words of the gospel to Paul, and in Acts 22:13 when Paul rehearsed that experience to others) But how many times in the New Testament do we read of one believer speaking to—or referring to—another believer by their common name? Follow your conscience, but, if you use the title religiously, be doubly sure you live up to your use of it by treating other believers with kind and respectful “Brotherly” or “Sisterly” love.

We live in a time when isolated lifestyles are common. Sadly, that mindset finds itself in the Christian community as well. “I prefer to live my Christian faith privately” is a frequent outlook today. However, it fails the New Testament example and teaching. From Jesus sending the disciples out two by two to Acts and through the church and personal letters, the New Testament consistently teaches believers to seek out and cultivate godly relationships with other believers. As one of many examples, consider the various passages that use armor and warfare as a symbol of our faith. (Romans 6 and Ephesians 6 as just two examples) No war was ever fought with one isolated soldier. A soldier who leaves the ranks of his fellow-soldiers and tries to fight alone is always a casualty, not a victor. Study the Roman army’s use of shields in their battle strategy to learn the significant importance of our staying tightly united and working within the worshipping community of faith—and in the faith “**which was once delivered unto the saints.**” (Jude 1:3 KJV) Add to this passage John’s emphasis on the union of fellowship (Personal and active union) with both the Lord and other believers in 1 John 1. Based on these New Testament examples, and many more, our fellowship—or lack thereof—mirrors our relationship with the Lord.

**If a man say, I love God, and hateth his brother, he is a liar: for he that loveth not his brother whom he hath seen, how can he love God whom he hath not seen? (1 John 4:20 KJV)**

Concepts of love and hate in the New Testament deal far more with how we **treat** others than with how we **feel** about them. Try rephrasing this verse, “If a man say, I love God, and wants nothing to do with his brother, he is a liar: for he that has nothing to do with his brother, whom he hath seen, how can he have anything to do with God whom he hath not seen?”

...**exhorting, and testifying that this is the true grace of God wherein ye stand.** That Peter qualifies “**true grace**” more than implies that such a thing as “untrue grace” exists. The point Peter makes in this lesson has to do with what we believe. “Grace” in its purest form refers to the “Gracious” character of God which is the same regardless of our thoughts or actions. Peter’s emphasis teaches us to hold to those Biblical truths and principles of conduct that agree with the character of God’s “True grace.” We dishonor our God and His grace if we loudly proclaim our belief in God and salvation all and only of His grace, but then we show something less than grace in our treatment of others. If we believe in God’s amazing saving grace, we are ethically bound to practice that same grace toward each other.

Peter was not only confident that his first readers were sound in their faith, but he was equally confident that they lived that grace, even in the heat of intense, life-threatening persecution for that faith. “**Wherein ye stand**” are precious words that affirm these people lived by the same grace they believed to be God’s deepest character toward them. We are not persecuted, so we are doubly bound “In good faith” to live by that “**true grace of God**” in our conduct toward each other. When we realize that we have done or said something that falls short of such grace, we should immediately pray for the Lord’s forgiveness, confess it to the person whom we treated “Ungracefully,” and work hard to repent.

**Greet ye one another with a kiss of charity. Peace be with you all that are in Christ Jesus. Amen.** Peter does not require that believers always greet each other with a kiss on the cheeks. He does require that we greet—and treat—each other with respectful, kind, and gentle grace, love-in-conduct. A rare exception, thankfully, but I once knew a believer who took this and similar New Testament lessons literally, so every greeting he gave included a hug and a kiss on the cheeks. However, this same person was always more than ready to critique what other believers said or did with a less-than-charity assessment. Some of the women in the church he attended cringed when he greeted them because his uncharitable outlook contradicted his pretense.

Apart from personal discipleship, every act of Christian culture in the New Testament affirms a true “Community” of believers, never an isolated believer pursuing his own path. Consider these two examples.

**Then they that gladly received his word were baptized: and the same day there were added unto them about three thousand souls. (Acts 2:41 KJV)**

**Praising God, and having favor with all the people. And the Lord added to the church daily such as should be saved. (Acts 2:47 KJV)**

Both verses relate to that first Day of Pentecost miracle recorded in Acts 2. The result of preaching convicted many while alienating others. Peter admonished those who were convicted by the preaching (“**Pricked in the heart**”) to repent and be baptized. Notice that both verses describe their conduct as being “**added unto them**” or “**added to the church.**” No stronger lesson could exist in the New Testament to affirm that water baptism based on one’s faith in Jesus means joining ourselves to a body of baptized believers. In all my years of ministry, I’ve had one person request that I baptize him who honestly stated that he had no desire to join or permanently identify himself with our church. I tried to explain this New Testament truth, but, in the end, I kindly declined to baptize him. Water baptism is obviously a personal act. But isn’t every act of Christian conduct a personal act? By New Testament teaching and example, baptism is also a public act of proclaiming our belief in Jesus as our one and only Savior, followed by the Acts 2 example of associating ourselves with the worshipping community before whom we are baptized. This sense of “Community” pervades the New Testament’s record of the faith of Jesus.

By our very nature, we are all broken people. Our brokenness often manifests itself in tension with, or separation from, this spiritual community of the church. If you isolate yourself, how can you know whether a given idea is Biblical or your imagination? In isolation, professing believers often slip into self-worship or, at least self-focused and self-first living. Opinion increasingly replaces respect for Scripture.

**Iron sharpeneth iron; so a man sharpeneth the countenance of his friend. (Proverbs 27:17 KJV)**

Solomon was blessed to write the wisdom the Lord gave him in clear, often visual ideas. What is the idea of iron sharpening iron? I grew up on a farm. My father always kept a good file handy. Many of our tools were intended to cut things, an ax, a saw, a hoe. You can eventually accomplish your work with a dull tool, but the effort necessary is manifold the effort if you have a sharp tool. The only way to sharpen a tool is by skillfully rubbing the file (“Iron”) against the edge of the tool (“Iron”). Apart from “Rubbing shoulders” with other believers, we all become “Dull” in our spiritual skills. I need you to sharpen me, and you need me as well. This sharpening occurs only when we skillfully rub the file against the edge of the tool. If you abuse or misuse (Even sincerely) your interaction with others, you damage them rather than help them. We’ve all been guilty of committing that error. Scripture teaches us to repent, forgive, and to ask for forgiveness when we fail.

How may I help you “Sharpen” your spiritual effectiveness today? Let’s honor the Lord’s instructions and Scripture’s example by encouraging and “Grace-filled” words. (Colossians 4:6 KJV)

Elder Joe Holder