

IV. Paul's Farewell

A. Greetings

In characteristic fashion, Paul closed out his letter to the Corinthians by attaching greetings from the saints in his vicinity. The value of this practice is easily lost on contemporary Christians who take for granted instant and ongoing communication with one another. This is all the more true given the proliferation of cell phones throughout the world. Between cell and satellite phone service, it's virtually impossible to be beyond the reach of anyone on the planet, no matter how distant or remote their location.

But the circumstance was obviously profoundly different in the first century. Communication between people was either in person, by letter, or through a third party. Where people were separated from one another, communication moved at the speed of human travel, which meant a message could take months, even years, to reach the recipient. People went long seasons without hearing from distant friends and loved ones, leaving them to wonder how those persons were doing – indeed, whether they were even still alive. *Geographical separation meant complete relational deprivation*; people felt strongly the sting of distance and any news – whether by letter or messenger – was a longed-for and precious gift. Unlike today where text messages and emails are an irritating nuisance, letters were prized, kept and consumed over and over again.

The spread of the Christian faith meant that the Spirit was adding more and more people to Christ's body, but an expanding Church meant increasing separation and isolation between Christian congregations. Christians in one part of the Roman Empire might have some awareness of churches in other regions, but they'd have little or no contact with them. Early on, such contact was primarily through the apostles and their associates; apostolic ministry was the main engine of the Church's growth, but also the primary means of connection between bodies of believers. Thus Paul's greetings in his letters weren't gratuitous or a nod to accepted etiquette. Such greetings were a critical aspect of the saints' personal awareness of and interaction with one another. Written and verbal salutations were as vital to the intimacy, unity and solidarity of the early churches as were the human ambassadors who carried them.

So in the present instance, Paul's greetings – which he extended to the saints at Corinth on behalf of numerous believers they didn't know as well as some they did – served at least a couple of important purposes.

- First, they reminded the Corinthians that they were part of a larger community of believers – a truth which distance, isolation and the pressing issues of life tend to obscure. Christ's body included the church at Corinth, but it wasn't confined to them.
- Secondly, receiving greetings from Christians they'd never met reminded the Corinthians that their place in Christ's body was not as separate or independent members. They were joined together as one body within their own congregation (12:12-27), and they were equally bound together with the saints across the world. By sending salutations, these distant Christians were testifying to the Corinthians that they knew of them and carried them in their hearts and prayers.

1. The first of Paul's greetings was the broadest, which he extended to the Corinthians on behalf of the *churches in Asia* (16:19a). Paul was writing from Ephesus, which was a major port city on the western coast of Asia ("Asia" refers to the western section of Asia Minor which today is part of Turkey). That Paul could issue such a greeting indicates that he maintained ongoing contact with churches across Asia and that those communities of believers were aware of and interested in God's work at Corinth (ref. Acts 19:10, 23-26). Were that not the case, he could not have truthfully said, "the churches of Asia greet you"; at most he could have said something like "I greet you on behalf of the saints here in Asia." Again, considering the immense difficulty of establishing and maintaining distant relationships in the ancient world, the fact that Paul could issue a greeting from the churches scattered across Asia is quite remarkable.
2. Secondly, Paul extended a greeting on behalf of *Aquila and Prisca* (Priscilla). Recall that Paul met this couple in Corinth on his first trip there and, from that point forward, they continued to be key figures in his ministry to the churches. (They had come to Corinth from Rome as the result of Claudius' decision to expel all Jews from the city because of uprisings associated with them.) Early in his Corinthian ministry Paul lived and worked with Aquila and Priscilla and he likely disciplined them in their faith (Acts 18:1-3).

Later, when Paul departed Corinth for Antioch in Syria, the couple travelled with him as far as Ephesus. They apparently remained in Ephesus until Paul returned and they were with him at the time of this letter (Acts 18:18-19:10). They had obviously established a home in Ephesus, for Paul mentioned that their residence was then serving as the meeting place for a group of Christians (16:19b). These saints also joined their heartfelt greetings to those of Aquila and Prisca.

Sometime later Aquila and Priscilla returned to Rome (Claudius' edict expelling the Jews was short-lived; he died in A.D. 54 only two years after issuing it). Perhaps they left Ephesus when Paul departed for Macedonia; whatever the case, they were in Rome when Paul penned the Roman epistle from Corinth (where he finalized the Jerusalem offering – ref. again 16:1-8 with Acts 20:1-3 and Romans 16:3-4). The last mention of this couple occurs in Paul's second letter to Timothy. Written from Rome shortly before his execution, Paul indicated that Aquila and Prisca were again in Ephesus, perhaps sent there by him to help in the work in that city (ref. 2 Timothy 1:15-18, 4:19).

3. Paul's third greeting to the Corinthians was from *all the brethren with him* (16:20a). Given that he identified Aquila and Priscilla by name, it seems that he was referring to saints at Ephesus whom the Corinthians did not know. (There would be no point in naming such individuals.) Moreover, since these Christians were present with Paul in Ephesus, it was appropriate to mention them separately from "the churches of Asia" which denoted the larger community of believers congregating in separate church bodies throughout the province of Asia. (Another possibility suggested by some commentators – though a less likely one given Paul's language – is that Paul was referring to the brethren from Corinth who were still with him (ref. 1:10-11 and 16:17).)

4. Paul's greetings included *his own*, suggested by his statement in 16:21. It is unclear whether he meant that he'd penned all of the greetings or only that he was adding his own. Either way, adding his own handwriting to his letter (Paul typically dictated his letters to an amanuensis) authenticated it and gave it his "imprimatur" (cf. Galatians 6:11-18; Colossians 4:18; 2 Thessalonians 3:17; Philemon 19). Moreover, in this case, lending his own hand to his greetings gave them a marked personal tone – something that was especially important given his strained relationship with the Corinthians.
5. Scholars disagree regarding the extent of Paul's written contribution to the letter's closing. Some believe he only signed his name; others believe he penned the last six verses (vv. 19-24); still others ascribe only vv. 21-24 to his own hand. While his statement in 16:21 seems to support the conclusion that he penned all of vv. 19-24, almost certainly he wrote everything from v. 21 to the end of the letter. Whatever the case, it's significant that, alongside his own greeting, Paul exhorted the Corinthians to greet *one another* (16:20b).

At first glance this may seem like an odd request. Why should the Corinthian saints have to greet one another? Weren't they together all the time as part of the same congregation? Was there some special need or circumstance at Corinth that provoked this?

- a. The first thing to note is that this way of closing his letters was not unusual for Paul (cf. Romans 16:16; 2 Corinthians 13:12; 1 Thessalonians 5:26). The "holy kiss" was practiced in the early Church as a sign of Christian fellowship and the unity and love which are to characterize it. It was a way for Christians to identify and acknowledge one another as brethren in Christ and tangibly express what their brotherhood entailed and called them to.
- b. At the same time, Paul's exhortation to greet one another with a holy kiss was especially relevant for the church at Corinth. Because every Christian struggles with self-concern and self-will (which are reflected in personal independence and autonomy), every Christian congregation struggles with disunity and discord. The natural mind plagues individual Christians and so plagues Christian churches. No congregation is exempt, but Paul's letters indicate that the Corinthians' carnality (lack of conformity to the mind of Christ) was wreaking havoc in their body. They were not only divided and discordant, many among them were actually proud of it. They believed they were attesting their mature faith and understanding by their factions and alignments (ref. again 1:10-4:21, 8:1-10:33, 11:1-34, 12:1-14:40). If greeting one another with a holy kiss was a relevant charge for all the churches, it was especially so for the church at Corinth.

"In the context of the community's divisions at Corinth, the holy kiss would necessarily serve as a powerful sign of reconciliation among people who had previously been estranged. It is easy to interpret this brief imperative as a perfunctory gesture, until we try to visualize the Corinthians actually putting it into practice in a community where conflict has prevailed." (Hays)

B. Admonition and Benediction

1. Following his call for the Corinthians to greet one another, Paul concluded with three parallel statements: an *admonition* and a two-fold *benediction*. Paul's admonition is found in 16:22, and it is a statement which has sparked no little discussion and debate through the centuries. The first thing that strikes the reader is that it seems out of place and perhaps even inappropriate. It's not that Paul hasn't confronted and challenged the Corinthians at several points; he has. But now, at the end of his letter, Paul was wrapping up with heartfelt greetings and then, seemingly out of nowhere, he issued a sober warning with a curse attached. Obviously Paul considered his statement to be appropriate and even profitable for the Corinthians and he must have intended for them to receive it in that way. What, then, did he mean and what did he hope to achieve by his warning?
 - a. The first thing to note is Paul's verb (*love*). He employed the Greek verb *phileo* rather than his customary *agapao*, which itself is noteworthy. For, in all of his writings, Paul used this verb only here and in one other place. (The noun cognates are common in the New Testament and connote friendship or friendliness.) In the other occurrence, Paul used the verb in reference to the love between *Christian brethren* (Titus 3:15), whereas here it refers to a person's love for *Christ*.

Perhaps someone might try to explain this unique expression by noting that Paul wrote these particular words while amanuenses in general penned his letters. The reasoning here is that Paul's amanuenses had a preference for *agapao* and this is why *phileo* doesn't occur more often in his writings. But Paul spoke Greek and most certainly dictated his letters in that language. He may not have written most of the content of his letters, but they were *his* letters and he would have insisted that his amanuensis accurately record his words.

When considering *phileo* in relation to the more common *agapao* two errors tend to arise. The first is treating these two verbs as roughly synonymous; the second is treating them as entirely distinct. The first error denies distinctions (whether of substance or nuance) while the second denies overlap in meaning. The truth is there is semantic overlap between these two verbs, but also important distinction.

This is one of the handful of instances in the New Testament in which *phileo* is used with respect to the relationship between God and men. Such usage is most common in John (cf. John 5:20, 16:27, 20:2, 21:15-17; Revelation 3:19). The verb typically refers to affection or desire associated with natural relations, whether between persons or between people and things (cf. Matthew 6:5, 10:37, 23:6; John 11:3, 36, 12:25, 15:19). Thus it can denote a *kiss*, which is a tangible sign of affection or devotion (ref. Matthew 26:48; Mark 14:44; cf. also Luke 7:45 along with Paul's references to a "holy kiss"). And as *phileo* is oriented toward natural affection, so it tends to connote love as concrete – love as it expresses itself in practice rather than as it is in itself (or as it is conceived). Thus this verb can carry the positive connotation of *loyalty* or *manifest devotion*; negatively, it can connote *self-interested, self-serving passion* (Matthew 6:5, 23:6; Revelation 22:15).

This emphasis would seem to provide a good explanation for Paul's use of it here. Under that assumption, when he spoke of men *loving* the Lord, Paul was referring to their *demonstrated* devotion to Him. And the singularly great demonstration of love for the Lord is sincere, tangible love for men – especially for the brethren (cf. John 14:21 with 15:1-17; also 1 Peter 1:22-23; 1 John 2:1-11, 3:1-21, 4:7-5:1).

- b. Paul's word choice suggests his meaning, but so does the fact that his statement embodies a *curse* ("let him be anathema"). Paul was speaking out of jealousy for Christ and God's purposes in Him: Whoever fails to love Jesus *authentically* – which includes sincere devotion to His saints and His work – deserves (and incurs) the curse of condemnation. Hays' comments are helpful:

"It should be noted that in 1 Corinthians [as indeed in all of Paul's writings] love for the Lord is closely tied to love for all the members of the body of Christ. Those who love the Lord will necessarily seek to build up the community. Those who destroy the community are, virtually by definition, not loving the Lord. Thus, the curse of 16:22 is a thinly veiled threat against those Corinthians who have turned spirituality into a competitive sport, a way of aggrandizing themselves rather than adoring their Lord and maker." (ref. 3:10-17, 8:1-10:33, 11:17-34, etc.)

- c. One final consideration is Paul's addition of the phrase, *maranatha*. This is the Greek transliteration of an Aramaic expression meaning "Our Lord, come." (Alternately, a different separation between the letters yields the sentence, "Our Lord has come," but this reading is not preferred by either the context or the early Church's use.) This expression is found in the *Didache*, a late first century treatise containing doctrinal, catechetical and church order material, and this may help to explain Paul's use of it in a letter to a Greek-speaking, Gentile congregation. (The first line of the *Didache* reads: "Teaching of the Lord to the Nations through the Twelve Apostles.") Its presence in the *Didache* seems to suggest that the early Church incorporated the expression into its liturgical prayers, and Paul's use of it here – without any translation or clarification – indicates that it was already known to the church in Corinth and was perhaps a part of their worship liturgy.

Moreover, it's reasonable to assume that the Corinthians understood the expression the way it was later used in the *Didache* since this treatise was written to instruct the Gentile churches. And if this was the case, then Paul would have used it in the same way: as highlighting the Church's confident longing for the Lord's Parousia and how that sure hope must direct their lives in this world.

The passage in the *Didache* where the expression occurs reads as follows: "*Remember, Lord, your Church, to deliver it from all evil and to make it perfect in your love and gather it together in its holiness from the four winds to your kingdom which you have prepared for it. For yours is the power and the glory forever. Let grace come and let this world pass away. Hosanna to the God of David. If any man be holy, let him come! If any man be not, let him repent: 'Maranatha, Amen.'*" (cf. this with Revelation 22:6-21).

It seems, then, that Paul's admonition – with the appended *maranatha* – was intended to provide the Corinthians with a summary challenge to order their lives –individually and corporately – in conformity to the Church's great hope and longing, namely Jesus' Parousia. His appearing will see the renewal and consummation of all things, *but also His reckoning of His saints and their faithfulness as servants awaiting and working toward their Lord's return* (cf. Matthew 24:32-25:30; Luke 12:35-48; 2 Corinthians 5:1-10; Titus 2). The Bridegroom is coming for His Bride at the climax of the age and she needs to be ready and adorned for Him. Paul wanted that great truth to drive the saints at Corinth – both in inflaming their works of love and faithfulness and in rebuking their sleepy carelessness and selfish, loveless orientation toward the Lord's beloved body.

2. Lastly, Paul sealed his letter with a two-fold benediction implicating the Lord Jesus and himself (16:23-24).

a. The first component of his benediction is common in Paul's letters, and that is his petition that the saints at Corinth would know the fullness of Christ's grace (cf. Romans 16:20; 2 Corinthians 13:14; Galatians 6:18; Ephesians 6:24; Philippians 4:23; Colossians 4:18; 1 Thessalonians 5:28; 2 Thessalonians 3:18). The fact that Paul attached this sort of benediction to each of his letters has led some to conclude that it was really nothing more than a customary greeting. But Paul was too fervent, conscientious and intentional to pen a gratuitous platitude. Indeed, Paul's understanding of God's grace in Christ would never permit him to do so.

For Paul, grace was much more than the generic, even whimsical notion embodied in the contemporary "unmerited favor" definition. Even more, grace is all too often treated as a narrow soteriological concept: It is set in contrast to "law" as the alternative way in which a person can be "saved." *Paul, however, understood that grace encompasses the entirety of the triune God's disposition, purpose, activity and accomplishment.* Grace speaks to the reality, intentionality and activity of love; that's why truth and grace are embodied in the *person* of Jesus Christ (John 1:14-17). When Paul sought Christ's grace for His saints, he wasn't asking for God to deal with them in a way contrary to "law," but neither was he mouthing a customary spiritual platitude. Paul's benediction was customary because it was universally relevant: *It expressed both his burden for the Lord's saints and his conviction of where their hope and resource lay.* Whatever their infirmities, failures and lack (and they are legion), Christ's power and resource in His Spirit are more than sufficient for His own. The grace which has taken them up in the divine life and love will perfect that union; grace will see the summing up of all things in Christ such that God will at last and forever be all in all. Paul was constrained by that profound truth and he wanted all of the saints to know it and thrive in it and thus he never ceased petitioning God in view of it.

b. And as Paul sought for the Corinthians the full, experiential knowledge of God's grace in Christ, so he longed for them to know *his* love for them. He loved them, not merely *as* Christ did, but *with* Christ's love poured out in his own heart. His love was Jesus' love in and through him; Paul loved them *in* Christ Jesus.