

3 JOHN 13-15

GREET THE FRIENDS BY NAME

“I had much to write to you, but I would rather not write with pen and ink. I hope to see you soon, and we will talk face to face.

“Peace be to you. The friends greet you. Greet the friends, every one of them.”¹

John’s third letter is addressed to a man named Gaius, whom we rightly suppose to have been a congregational leader. The letter addresses a departure from orthopraxy precipitated and perpetuated by a man named Diotrephes. Diotrephes was apparently a church leader, either in the congregation to which Gaius belonged or to a church known to him. In his position of congregational influence, Diotrephes exhibited abhorrent arrogance manifested through acting as a dictator within the congregation. He refused to acknowledge written communication received from the Apostle John [VERSE 9], spoke ill of the work in which the Apostle was engaged [VERSE 10], and he refused to welcome itinerating missionaries, even going so far as to excommunicate church members who spoke in favour of receiving such servants of the churches. John addressed Diotrephes’ aberrant behaviour and promised to confront him shortly.

Conversely, the Apostle commended Gaius as one who was faithful to the universal practise of the churches [VERSE 5], showing hospitality to those engaged in full-time service before the Lord. Itinerating missionaries had testified to his love demonstrated through hospitality and generosity toward them and the work to which they were appointed [VERSE 6].

The purpose of the message is not to provide a thorough exposition of the brief missive, but to explore the truth revealed in John’s final statement. A literal translation of the closing statement reads, “Greet the friends by name.” Thus, the title of the message. However, John uses a Greek idiom which really cannot be translated literally to capture the sense of what he is saying. Therefore, in the English Standard Version we have the idiomatic translation which enjoins Gaius, the recipient of the letter, “Greet the friends, every one of them.”

We will be better equipped to serve together if we thoroughly understand the will of the Master for His people. His will is expressed through the manner in which we treat one another within the Family. Join me, then, in exploring the implications of the composition of the church and the manner in which we are to receive one another within the Body of Christ.

A NEW TESTAMENT CHURCH IS COMPOSED OF FRIENDS — John informs Gaius that fellow Christians associated with the Apostle send their greetings along with the letter John is writing; and then the Apostle instructs Gaius to greet other Christians with whom He worships. What is important for us in this message is to note that John refers to the fellow Christians with him as “friends,” and he speaks of those fellow Christians with Gaius as “friends.” It is a powerful testimony of the ideal for a congregation—Christians are to be friends.

The Bible uses both the imagery of family and the imagery of friendship to instruct us concerning expected relationships among Christians, and especially the relationship of those who are part of the same congregation. As is true of all analogies, these particular comparisons are not perfect, though they do reveal what a member of the community of faith should be able to anticipate in terms of relationship with other members within that particular community.

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You may have heard at some time the old saw that avows, “You cannot choose your family; but you can choose your friends.” In the normal course of life, one is born into a family. However, our acceptance of others and the way we treat others will determine our friendships regardless of relationship. Christians are children of a common Father, and as such we share much in common because we have each experienced the second birth. However, John’s reference stresses a relationship that lies solely within parameters of our own choosing—we are to love one another, freely extending our friendship to those with whom we share this common Faith, and in turn accepting their friendship which will be offered to us.

We Christians are responsible to recognise that we are members of one Family, treating one another as brothers and sisters. Unfortunately, we can and do treat family members unfairly on occasion, primarily because we can. Husbands can be abrupt and harsh toward their wives, just because they can. Wives can be thoughtless toward their husbands, because they know they can get away with it. Similarly, children many times are careless in their treatment of parents, and vice versa. Siblings often act unfairly toward one another, not considering the consequences of their actions. In a similar manner, we often take fellow Christians for granted, treating one another in a most despicable manner and ignoring our spiritual relationship.

Friends, on the other hand, are not usually taken for granted, because we dare not jeopardise the relationship. In other words, we treat friends differently from the way we treat members of our family. I am not justifying the distinction; I am only observing that the distinction exists. The Word provides us with considerable insight into the actions we should normally anticipate from friends. A review of some well-known passages will assist us in thinking through our actions toward one another within the congregation.

The Wise Man has provided insight into what should be expected of friends. He writes, “A friend loves at all times” [PROVERBS 17:17]. Friendship certainly involves affection for one another, but friendship does not cease at the level of mere feelings. Friends are friends because we and they have chosen to be such. Therefore, friendship that is genuine does not depend upon how one feels. Friends do not cease to love because they do not agree with what is said or thought; friendship runs much deeper than merely enjoying one another’s company.

Two other proverbs that give us further insight into friendship inform us:

“Faithful are the wounds of a friend;
profuse are the kisses of an enemy”;

[PROVERBS 27:6]

and,

“Oil and perfume make the heart glad,
and the sweetness of a friend comes from his earnest counsel.”

[PROVERBS 27:9]

These proverbs are a reminder that a true friend is willing to risk friendship by speaking the truth in love, and the wise counsel of a friend who cares for our welfare is of greater value than the flattery and obsequiousness of an enemy. A friend will hold us responsible to do what is right, rather than saying what is politic in order to make us feel good about ourselves. A friend will be sufficiently concerned for us that he will tell us when we are wrong, warning us to do what is right so that we do not injure ourselves or the cause of Christ.

How deep is the love of friends within a New Testament congregation? Jesus taught His disciples, “Greater love has no one than this, that someone lay down his life for his friends” [JOHN 15:13]. Though we immediately recognise this as the standard for love within the Christian community, note that Jesus says that the sacrifice anticipated is for friends. We would anticipate that a mother would lay down her life for her child, or that a father would lay down his life for his wife. However, Jesus says that love is measure by willingness to sacrifice for one’s *friends*.

Then, in order to ensure that we grasp the import of His words, He addresses those to whom He was speaking, “You are my friends if you do what I command you” [JOHN 15: 14]. Those who are obedient to His Word are friends of the Master. Those who are obedient to His Word will also share friendship with one another as they share in His friendship. Friendship is integral to obedience to the Master, and it cannot be segregated or compartmentalised. Friendship to the Master requires universality of friendship to all whom He calls “friends.”

Having established this truth, we should review some of the actions of friendship through contrasting the actions of those who dishonour such friendship. In order to initiate this aspect of the discussion, I invite you to look again to the Proverbs of Solomon. There, he has written:

“A dishonest man spreads strife,
and a whisperer separates close friends.”

[PROVERBS 16:28]

Slander and gossip and dishonesty destroy friendships. Those who profess to serve the Master must eschew all such actions. Paul has taught those who walk as Christians, “Let all bitterness and wrath and anger and clamour and slander be put away from you, along with all malice.” Then, placing a positive emphasis on the actions of friends, he writes, “Be kind to one another, tender-hearted, forgiving one another, as God in Christ forgave you” [EPHESIANS 4:31, 32].

Similarly, in the letter to the Christians of Colossae, the Apostle has written, “You must put away all “anger, wrath, malice, slander and obscene talk from your mouth. Do not lie to one another, seeing that you have put off the old self with its practises and have put on the new self, which is being renewed in knowledge after the image of its Creator” [COLOSSIANS 3:8-10]. In the context of the message, Paul teaches Christians that they must act as friends toward one another, and friends do not lie or permit their anger to overwhelm their gentleness.

There was a time when we were in the world, and at that time we were “foolish, disobedient, led astray, slaves to various passions and pleasures, passing our days in malice and envy, hated by others and hating one another.” Things changed, however, for “when the goodness and loving kindness of God our Saviour appeared, He saved us, not because of works done by us in righteousness, but according to His own mercy, by the washing of regeneration and renewal of the Holy Spirit, whom He poured out on us richly through Jesus Christ our Saviour, so that being justified by grace we might become heirs according to the hope of eternal life” [TITUS 3:3-7].

Look to the Proverbs once more to see another action of friendship that must be fostered if we will be friends as God intends us to be.

“Whoever covers an offence seeks love,
but he who repeats a matter separates close friends.”

[PROVERBS 17:9]

This is an iteration of a proverb concerning friendship I cited earlier: “A friend loves at all times” [PROVERBS 17:17]. Genuine friendship, the love exhibited by Christians who live among fellow believers as friends, does not turn friendship on and off.

In a church I once served was a couple considered by many to be stalwarts of the Faith. While on an extended vacation, their child, who was also a member of the congregation, became disgruntled. Refusing to be mollified, the man and his family ceased attending services. Their disgruntlement was so acute that they induced several others families to likewise cease participating in the life of the Body. When the parents of that man returned to the community, they joined a whisper campaign against me, complaining that I was shutting their child out of the church. Their child, they whined, had no place to go to church. The complaint was a blatant lie, and they knew it. However, their pique overwhelmed their concern for either the welfare of the congregation or for the glory of Christ. In their arrogance, they descended into malice and envy and hatred because they were ruled by their passions. Ultimately, they became disobedient to the Word, and justified their disobedience with the claim that they “had to do something.”

Tragically, the actions demonstrated by that couple are not exceptional among evangelical Christians in this day. In part, this is because we have transformed the church of the Living God from the vibrant, living Bride of Christ into a political organisation. Democracy has superseded obedience to Him who is Head of the Body among modern evangelical congregations. In part, this transformation has come about through the concession of congregational authority to denominational leaders in combination with an unbiblical emphasis upon democracy in order to satisfy governmental licensure. Thus, today the congregations of our Lord are organisations to be joined rather than bodies to which the redeemed are appointed.

Biblical authority wanes and congregational discipline is unknown because we fear violating the rights of untaught church members. Obedience to the will of God is dependent upon whether such obedience will inconvenience us, for our immediate happiness is deemed to be the reason for being Christians. In the context of the message before us, the attitude demonstrated among contemporary churches destroys congregational intimacy, making acquaintances of our fellow worshippers rather than creating friends. Nevertheless, we do well to remember that a New Testament church is composed of friends.

MEMBERS OF A NEW TESTAMENT CHURCH ARE CONCERNED FOR ONE ANOTHER —

Remember, we are focused on a New Testament church and not a mere organisation as often exists today. The friendship of church members is expressed through concern for one another. The biblical ideal is that of a Body in which each member seeks the welfare of the remainder of the Body. Rather than seeking his or her own welfare, the church member that acts in obedience to Christ seeks the welfare of others within the congregation. It is true that Paul complained to the Christians in Philippi that all the other workers associated with him, with the sole exception of Timothy, sought “their own interests, not those of Jesus Christ” [COLOSSIANS 2:21].

Such devotion to one another requires knowledge of the will of God as revealed through the Word of God and commitment to fulfil all that has been delivered through that Word. Otherwise, we inevitably seek our own welfare rather than the welfare of others. We have witnessed a strange promotion of self-interest in this day as seemingly knowledgeable people among the professed people of God argue that you have to love yourself before you can love others. Where is that famous verse that enjoins that we embrace this aberrant doctrine? Pop psychology circulates as biblical doctrine, and contemporary Christians are too ignorant of the Word of God to know that they are being bamboozled.

Throughout the Word of God are a variety of reciprocal commands, each predicated upon the concept of concern for others. We are to “love one another” [e.g. **1 THESSALONIANS 4:9**]. According to the Word, Christians are to “seek to do good to one another” [**1 THESSALONIANS 5:15**], building one another and encouraging one another [**1 THESSALONIANS 5:11**]. We are to “admonish one another” [**COLOSSIANS 3:16**], whilst simultaneously “bearing with one another” and “forgiving each other” [**COLOSSIANS 3:13**]. We are to have an attitude of mutual submission to one another [**EPHESIANS 5:21**], speaking the truth to one another [e.g. **EPHESIANS 4:25**]. We are to “live in harmony with one another” [**ROMANS 12:16**] even as through love we “serve one another” [**GALATIANS 5:13**]. I am especially humbled by Paul’s admonition in **ROMANS 12:10**: “Outdo one another in showing honour.” The standard that the Apostle sets for Christians is that we must “Do nothing from rivalry or conceit, but in humility count others more significant than [ourselves]” [**PHILIPPIANS 2:3**].

Because we are to be concerned for one another, we are taught to “exhort one another” [**HEBREWS 3:13**] and to “stir up one another to love and good works” [**HEBREWS 10:24**], thus “encouraging one another” [**HEBREWS 10:25**]. James will address common sinful behaviour that must be refused a place in the life of the child of God by insisting that we must not “speak evil against one another” [**JAMES 4:11**], and that we must refuse to “grumble against one another” [**JAMES 5:9**]. Instead, we are to confess our sins to one another and to “pray for one another” [**JAMES 5:16**].

Let me be practical with you. If we fulfil the ideal presented in the New Testament letters, we will assess the conduct of our lives by whether our actions and our attitudes build up our fellow members of this Body, whether we are encouraging those who share this Faith, and whether we are consoling those who hurt. There will not be a single person “drop out” of the life of the church, because we will speak with them and urge them to continue walking in the Spirit. There will not be a case of extended discouragement because we will be sensitive to what is happening in the life of those with whom the Spirit has united us, and we will seek their welfare.

Frankly, the concern expressed by many of the professed people of God is for the structure rather than for the being. What I mean is that people will become combative to preserve the denomination, to preserve the political integrity of a church, or even to preserve the building in which the church meets. Our eyes are so dimmed by the attitudes of this dying world that we are incapable of seeing the beauty of the Body of Christ, and so we expend all our energies seeking to preserve the shell rather than the fruit.

Perhaps this is not surprising, since we of the boomer generation expend untold wealth and energy trying to preserve our youth. Resources are devoted to remembering our past. Every community has a radio station playing “golden oldies,” music that is associated with our youth. The Internet is awash with Emails and web sites that seek to convince us that what once was is better than what now is. Elderly women attempt to dress as though they were teenagers, and men still think they can accomplish all they did when they were twenty-one. With such a prevalent mindset in our society, I suppose it should not be thought odd that we would seek to preserve past glories through maintaining the structure rather than building the body.

Europe is filled with church buildings that once housed vast congregations of worshippers, and every major city in North America has its own complement of once great churches that are empty today. Across the Canadian prairies are multiplied communities that once were blessed with vibrant congregations, though today there remains only a building to remind travellers of what once animated the moral fervour and informed the ethical decisions of those same communities.

We are in danger of becoming just another dry husk littering the ecclesiastical landscape—a reminder of failure to seize the promise of life if we fail to be concerned for one another. If we permit ourselves to become just another political entity, like thousands of other such entities masquerading as churches of our Lord, we will not long survive. God seeks to create the Body of Christ in each congregation; but that life will only be expressed through members who have trained themselves to be friends, and especially to be concerned for one another. If all we are is a religious society that meets intermittently to sing religious songs, to say prayers, to read a few verses of the Bible and to endure a carefully crafted sermon designed to make us feel good about our religion, we will not long endure—nor should we!

Dear people, we are not immune to heady delusions that accompany manipulative power; and because we are passionate about the structure—whether it is a denomination, or a building, or a political entity identified as a church—we will resort to raw political power or manipulate fellow Christians until we achieve our own desired ends, if we do not commit ourselves to pursuing peace with one another and if we fail to esteem one another as God’s holy people.

MEMBERS OF A NEW TESTAMENT CHURCH ARE COMPASSIONATE TOWARD ONE ANOTHER — We are weighing the attitudes and actions that should be demonstrated within a New Testament congregation. Ultimately, Christians are called to “love one another earnestly from a pure heart” [1 PETER 1:22]. This speaks of willing, voluntary extension of friendship to our fellow believers who share the life of the Body.

When I speak of friends exhibiting concern for one another, it is easy to slip into focusing on the external action rather than working at ensuring that we truly love one another from the heart. It is true that we must not permit ourselves to operate on the basis of how we feel about one another, but neither must we permit ourselves to become automatons without any feeling for each other. The Word of God teaches us to be compassionate, recognising the weaknesses and the hurts that each one of us experiences.

Concern is revealed through the actions of those who understand God’s call to be friends; compassion is the motive force that impels concern to inform our lives. God’s Word teaches His people to clothe ourselves with “compassionate hearts, kindness, humility, meekness, and patience, bearing with one another” and “forgiving one another” [COLOSSIANS 3:12, 13]. Jesus used that same word that is translated “compassionate” in this verse, when He was speaking of the attitude that should prevail in the life of a Christian. He said, “You must be compassionate, just as your Father is compassionate” [LUKE 6:36, NEW LIVING TRANSLATION].

A slightly different concept of what is entailed in compassion is conveyed in Hebrews. The author of that letter specifically says that the early Christians “had compassion on those” who were imprisoned because of their faith [HEBREWS 10:34]. Whereas with the former command Paul spoke of showing mercy, and hence compassion, in this instance a different word speaks of sympathy for those who are experiencing trials. The author speaks of Jesus as sympathetic, of showing compassion because He understands what we are going through. He writes, “We do not have a high priest who is unable to sympathise with our weakness, but One who in every respect has been tempted as we are, yet without sin” [HEBREWS 4:15]

We should expect compassion from the fellow members of this Body. We have shared our lives, rejoicing with one another as God has blessed and grieving with one another in trials. We have prayed for one another and urged one another onward when weariness threatened to overwhelm us. We have persevered because we knew we did not stand alone in the conflicts we faced. Only those who have not shared their lives will fail to be compassionate to one another.

APPLICATIONS FOR OUR CONGREGATION — Let's take a few moments to think through some of the implications of what has been said so that we can prepare ourselves to be the holy people God has called us to be. I urge each member of the Body to think of what the congregation is, and to consider what we must become. We are the Body of Christ, whether we understand that concept as fully as we ought or whether we still grapple with all that it means.

Whatever else is implied by John's words, here within the church, among the people of God, we should expect to be with friends. Here there should be safety. Here, a wounded individual should find healing and shelter until he or she is again able to enter the fray. Here, the fearful individual should find fresh courage as he or she stands with others who accept the timid as the equal of every other Christian. Here, the weary should find rest among the people who will stand guard as they refresh themselves until such time that they are able to take up the burden of the conflict once more.

Too often the churches, acting as political entities, have consumed those who are weak or weary or wounded. Unbiblical thinking seems to predominate among many of the churches of our Lord, so that we tolerate ungodly behaviour because we do not wish to hurt anyone's feelings, even as we attack the wounded and shun the weak and the weary because they do not measure up to our artificial standard. Christianity within too many of the congregations of Christ consists of a cloak for our lives with which we attempt to hide who we really are, hoping that no one notices our hypocrisy. The world is not fooled, however, nor is God deceived. All we have done when we engage in such self-deceit is to dishonour Christ and render the church weak and vulnerable before the enemy of our souls. There is need for this church to determine that we will be friends, honouring Christ and building one another and encouraging one another and consoling one another. In that context, consider what we must do if we will truly be friends and if we will make the church into the living Body of Christ as He intended it to be.

If we will be friends, *we must determine that we will build one another*. Above all else, the people of God must recapture what it means to be servants of the True and Living God. I heard of a congregation this week that wants to "hire" a preacher, but they bruit about that they are still entangled with their former pastor and hence cannot hire a preacher. I suppose they have a problem, but it is a problem of their own making. God appoints whom He wills to be pastor; but congregations seem to assume they can hire whom they want.

A pastor is responsible to teach those whom God entrusts to his care, protecting the flock from assault from vicious predators. The work of the pastor is never conducted in isolation from the remainder of the flock, for each member of the Body is a servant of God, appointed and gifted by the Spirit to perform some particular ministry that He has determined is vital to overall health of the church. Each member of this assembly is a servant of the True and Living God. You are vital, but you are not indispensable. God will use you, and He wants to do so, but He will not wait while you decide whether you will serve as He has called you to do or whether you will ignore His appointment.

Each member of the Body is necessary in order to build a strong congregation. Each member of the Body is responsible to work together to build up all whom God appoints to the assembly. You have received a divine task, and if you are not building, you are destroying. I can assure you that there is no gift of warming a seat. As important as it is to attend the worship of the congregation, you are a member of the Body each day of the week and your gifts are still necessary if the church is to prosper and if the people of God are to be built up in this most holy Faith. The decision is yours. What are you doing for Christ's sake?

If we will be friends, *we must determine that we will care for one another*. Though we are a young congregation, already we have witnessed some saints who are wounded. Some who said they would stand with us lost their nerve when they realised the cost of standing without the support of structures that are taken from granted by most within the religious world. Though we may be disappointed in their stance, we are responsible to demonstrate that we are the people of God by showing concern for one another and for those who are weak and wounded.

About 150 A.D. a heathen writer viewed the Christians in a time of severe persecution. Of those Christians he wrote, “Behold how they love one another.” He saw their compassion for one another expressed through the manner in which they cared for one another. I have often drawn inspiration thinking of our spiritual forebears. In Scripture we read of them, “Recall the former days when, after you were enlightened, you endured a hard struggle with sufferings, sometimes being publicly exposed to reproach and affliction, and sometimes being partners with those so treated. For you had compassion on those in prison, and you joyfully accepted the plundering of your property, since you knew that you yourselves had a better possession and an abiding one. Therefore do not throw away your confidence, which has a great reward. For you have need of endurance, so that when you have done the will of God you may receive what is promised. For,

“Yet a little while,
and the coming one will come and will not delay;
but my righteous one shall live by faith,
and if he shrinks back,
my soul has no pleasure in him.”

“But we are not of those who shrink back and are destroyed, but of those who have faith and preserve their souls” [HEBREWS 10:32-39].

They indeed held fast the confession of their hope without wavering. They indeed appear to have considered how to stir up one another to love and good works. They appear to have indeed continued to meet together, encouraging one another and living in anticipation of the Day that is drawing nearer [see HEBREWS 10:24, 25]. In the same way, we must care for one another.

If we will be friends, *we must determine that we will sympathise with one another*. Remember, compassion is the motive power for the godly expression of concern. We must recognise those who are weak, and lend them our strength until they are able to stand firm again. We must realise that some are weary and seek to help them find rest so that they may again take up their rightful place within the assembly. We must seek out the wounded and dress their wounds so that they can be healed. We must show compassion to one another.

If we will be friends, *we must determine that we will honour one another*. The verse underlying this command is ROMANS 12:10: “Outdo one another in showing honour.” Every member of the Body of Christ is a trophy of divine grace. Each member has fought battles that no one else knows about; each has had victories that are theirs alone. Because of God’s mercies and grace showered on His people, each member of the Body deserves respect from every other member. If each of us determined that we would honour one another, we would transform the congregation and the impact on our communities would be unprecedented in this day. Were but one thing to come out of my ministry among you, I would that it would be for each of us to determine that we will henceforth honour one another.

Each member should find freedom from fear that their confidence might be betrayed, or that someone will take advantage of their wounds. No member of the assembly should be compelled to live guarding his or her feelings and emotions because of the threat of injury from a fellow member of the Body. Each member of the assembly should be received with honour and treated with dignity befitting a child of the True and Living God. Until this is accomplished, we are only playing church.

As is always true, I dare not presume against grace by failing to warn each one who hears to examine his or her heart to determine that they are trusting solely, trusting fully, in the grace of Christ Jesus our Lord. The Word of God testifies that He was sacrificed because of our sin and raised for our justification. Therefore, we have received the call to believe on the Lord Jesus Christ. This is the Word of God. "If you confess with your mouth, 'Jesus is Lord!' believing in your heart that God has raised Him from the dead, you shall be saved. For it is with the heart that one believes and is declared righteous and with the mouth that one confesses and is saved." Scripture promises, "Everyone who calls on the Name of the Lord will be saved" [**ROMANS 10:9, 10, 13**]. Believe the message and be saved. Amen.