

Let's Be Friendly!



CHAPTER ONE

THE VISIT

Have you ever visited a place where you were ignored? Maybe it was a specialty store you had looked forward to visiting for a long time, but when you stepped inside and realized how huge it was, you quickly searched the aisles for a brightly-tagged employee, but none could be found for miles, it seemed.

You spent two hours scouring the shelves for the one item you had been anticipating for months, but by the time you found your widget, you were worn out and ready to go home. As you walked to the car you wondered why everyone had made such a big deal about the place. After all, it was just like any other store.

We've all had this experience, but what if it happened to you when you visited a church?

Suppose your friend had been inviting you to visit for months, and you finally gave in and made the trip to the bigger than life building you had always wondered about. You had to park ten rows out, and as you walked toward the enormous glass doors, your heart pounding, you wondered if you would fit in.

You made your way inside, seemingly unnoticed, and then you looked around. Suddenly, it was if you were no longer in a church, but in an endless warehouse with unfamiliar sights and sounds all around you.

Where was the sanctuary? Where was the restroom? Where should you hang your coat, and what time did everything start anyway? You saw signs, but in your nervousness you could not understand them.

People seemed to be moving in every direction, so you picked a hallway and began to walk, trying to blend in. You eventually reached the Children's Wing and realized you had made a wrong turn. Everyone around you seemed self-absorbed, so you were embarrassed to stop someone and ask for directions.

After 15 long minutes, you finally found the sanctuary and grabbed the first open seat you saw. Just then, a couple came toward you, unsmiling, and as they passed by you distinctly heard them say, "She's in our seat." You looked behind you, expecting to see a reserved sign, but none was there. Your discomfort intensified as you wondered why they were mad at you when they didn't even know you.

Everyone seemed to have a purpose, which you supposed was good, but no one took time to notice you, the newcomer. You needed a restroom visit, but you were afraid to leave your things on the seat and walk away. You might not be able to find your way back. You realized you had felt this way before, on your first day in a new school many years ago. You were the outsider again, and everyone was ignoring you.

A hearty, "Hello!" broke the silence, and you breathed a sigh of relief as your friend sat down beside you. The worst part was over, but you wondered why everyone had made such a big deal about this place. After all, it was just like every other church you had

ever been in, cold and unfriendly.

The service began, and you tried to enjoy it, but you could not get past the fact that no one had greeted you. No one had noticed. When the pastor asked everyone to shake hands with one another, five people came over with arms outstretched and smiles wide, but they seemed fake and uncaring, especially the couple whose seat you had accidentally taken.

You hung in there and made it to the end, gripping the pew in front of you during the altar call. You wanted to believe in this Jesus, but you could not escape the reality of the people who worshipped Him. They seemed to be one way when people were looking and another way when they were not. It was extremely uncomfortable, and you just wanted to go home.

You said goodbye to your friend, and you made your way through the laughing crowd in the foyer after the service ended. What were they so happy about anyway? Again, not one person offered a hand, and not one eye looked your way. “Hypocrites!” you thought as you exited. “I’ll never come back here again!”

CHAPTER TWO

GREET ONE ANOTHER

How terrible for such a scenario to take place, but unfortunately it does again and again in places all over America. This should not be so because the Bible commands us to greet one another. It's not a suggestion, or even an option, but a command.

Five times the Apostle Paul commanded the readers of his letters to “Greet one another”, and four of those times he added “with a holy kiss” (2 Corinthians 13:12). Words of welcome are nice, but this command refers to something much deeper.

When we think of a greeting, we usually think of exchanging niceties and polite small talk. “Good morning! How are you?” seems to flow out of most mouths without thought, but do we really mean what we say? Do we really want to know how someone is? And what about this “holy kiss?” Does anyone want to be kissed by a stranger?

We need to know what an appropriate greeting ought to be when we come to church. We must greet our first time guests in a way they will appreciate and remember, but we also have a duty to greet one another, those we have known and loved for years. We never know when Sister Blessed will need a good hug from another sister to help her over the hump she's facing on a given day.

Think about the reasons we greet others. In the workplace, it is often an unwritten rule that we be polite to our coworkers, even if we don't care a lick about how they are.

In the marketplace, we are greeted by "Welcome to (fill in the name of your favorite store)" by someone we know is only saying it because they are paid to. We don't feel any more welcome just because they said the words. There are other times when we greet someone out of respect for their office, for their authoritative appearance, or because they expect us to honor their presence.

None of these motivations will work in the church. To fulfill Paul's command, we must greet one another in truth and sincerity, not out of obligation or expectation. New people know when we mean what we say, and when we are just going through the motions. Let's be real, and let's be sure to follow up on our words of kindness with actions that provide meaningful assistance.

Hello! My Name Is...

Greeting those who are visiting our church for the first time should be a simple process. Smile sincerely, stretch out a hand to shake theirs enthusiastically, and mean every word you say. Simple, but crucial. Remember the opening nightmare story. We never want this to happen to anyone who visits our church.

Our goal is for every person to be greeted a minimum of three times before they enter the sanctuary. This is why we have strategically placed parking

attendants, doormen, greeters, ambassadors, and ushers all along the designated path.

But what if a visitor comes in a back door, or if he slips in amidst a crowd of people and goes unrecognized? Suppose the only people a visitor meets on his way to the sanctuary are church members, just regular people moving to and fro on their way to the nursery, or the choir room, or the café? What if these people become the greeting team by default?

We all should be intently focused on our “job” for the day, whether it be singing in the choir, working in the nursery, making coffee, or a host of other vital services that make our church experience great. But no one should be so focused on doing their job for people that they ignore making personal contact with people.

Is getting to your spot on time so important that you can justify walking by a newcomer without saying, “Hello! Welcome to Only Believe Ministries. My name is Bob. What’s yours?” We sincerely hope not.

Making guests feel welcome is vital. First impressions are one-time only opportunities that we can never get back. This is why we encourage you to learn the techniques that create a good Christian greeting, and to use them with everyone you meet.

The Holy Kiss

Back we come to our command to greet one another “with a holy kiss.” It sounds disturbing, but in reality it is a matter of cultural understanding. In

the days of the letters from Paul, it was accepted practice for men and women to greet one another with a kiss.

Remember when Judas greeted Jesus with a kiss, and in so doing certified His death? Jesus was not uncomfortable with the kiss itself, but with the motive and intention behind it. In His day, a kiss signified sincere affection, so when Judas betrayed Jesus this way, it added insult to injury.

In today's society, there are some cultures where a ritualistic kiss is still acceptable, even with those you are meeting for the first time. A peck on the cheek is common in many European nations, and in the Middle East.

For us in America, a hearty handshake, a pat on the shoulder, or a quick hug are more comfortable. It's not the action that matters nearly as much as the motive behind it.

When you greet a first time guest, be sure to make eye contact, and greet them warmly and sincerely. Tell them you are glad they have come to visit, and if you are in a place where it is appropriate, ask if there is anything you can do for them.

They may react uncomfortably at first, not being used to such a greeting, but don't let that discourage you. Be kind and gentle, watching for cues to tell you if you are going too far, but don't let them go without a proper greeting just because they have trouble making eye contact.

If you are the first person to meet them in the building, make sure they know where the basic necessities are located. Point out the Welcome Center,

the closest entrance to the Main Sanctuary, the nearby restrooms, and the direction signs. If they have children, walk with them to the Welcome Center to ask for a tour of the Children's Church.

Don't overwhelm them, but make sure they are aware of their surroundings before you let them go. If yours is the first impression, make it a lasting one.

Greeting the Faithful

If greeting first time guests is essential, so is greeting the faithful flock. Most church members are so used to one another, they sometimes look at each other as part of the scenery.

"Oh, there's Sister Soandso. She always drinks coffee before service," you might think as you see your acquaintance in the café on Sunday morning. Try to ask yourself, "When was the last time I spoke with Sister Soandso?"

There may be a reason she drinks so much coffee, and it may do her good for you to take a moment to say hello and find out what's going on in her life. We cannot neglect one another just because we are familiar.

There are other hindrances to greeting those you know. Sometimes it comes down to selfish conversation. When was the last time you encouraged a brother in the Lord without it benefitting you? When was the last time you took a real interest in someone else's story, instead of insisting on telling your own?

If you say, "Ouch!", it may be time to hold your stories in check for awhile so that you can let someone

else get their stories out. We all have a testimony, and we all need to be heard, but we should take note of our anatomy and listen twice as much as we speak.

We need to concentrate on greeting longtime church members with the same enthusiasm we extend to a guest. Let's go out of our way to listen to one another, and to pray for one another, building each other up in the Word.

This all takes time, and none of us has much to spare these days. Perhaps we ought to consider letting certain things go on Sunday morning and Wednesday evening so that we will have more time to spend with people before and after church.

Use your extra time to seek out someone you've known for years, and surprise them by actually talking with them face to face for a few minutes. Give them a lift, and give yourself an opportunity to be used by God.

CHAPTER THREE

WHY BE GREETED?

There is a flip side to this coin, and it is your own expectation for greetings in the church. Jesus warned us about desiring attention for the wrong reason when He said, “Beware of the scribes, which desire to walk in long robes, and love greetings in the markets, and the highest seats in the synagogues, and the chief rooms at feasts” (Luke 20:46).

These men obviously liked the praise of men more than giving glory to God, and they risked eternal damnation because they preferred to be known and recognized by others rather than to know the living God.

Offense can be the result if we become accustomed to being greeted in a certain way, and then suddenly the greeting changes, or someone seems to pass us by without the usual “Hello, Brother Goodworks! You are such a blessing! Have a great day!”

We would do well to remember what happened to Herod when he allowed men to honor him more than God. Acts 12:21-23 says:

“And upon a set day Herod, arrayed in royal apparel, sat upon his throne, and made an oration unto them. And the people gave a shout, saying, ‘It is the voice of a god, and not of a man.’ And immediately the angel of the Lord smote him, because he gave not God the glory: and he was eaten of worms, and gave

up the ghost.”

Intense, but true. Let’s be wary and watch out for pride in our own lives. If it appears to be creeping in, it’s time to turn our focus toward others, and to make sure we greet many more people than greet us in return.

Little Foxes

Song of Solomon 2:15 talks about “the little foxes that spoil the vines.” Offenses are like these annoying creatures. They sneak in when we least expect it, and they ruin our harvest.

There can be legitimate offenses if, for instance, someone fails to live up to a contract. This happens all too often in the Body of Christ. You may need to seek counsel before you act in this case, but it does not eliminate your need to forgive.

Many times we deal with little offenses, those pesky annoyances that make people avoid each other. We cannot be moved by such things, but we must train ourselves to love each other because of our spiritual ties rather than for the natural things we say and do.

The Bible tells us to “be kind one to another, tenderhearted, forgiving one another, even as God for Christ’s sake has forgiven you” (Ephesians 4:32).

Forgiveness should be a staple in the church just as it is a staple in your home. After all, we are known as “the household of faith.” Ours is a family relationship, and just as you have to forgive Uncle Dud, you have to forgive Brother Fumbles.

We all make mistakes, forget to be polite, get wrapped up in ourselves, and fail to notice others; which is why we must forgive freely.

Most often, offenses are trumped up imaginations based on what we think someone else thought. The imagination is a great thing, until it runs away with itself. Make the first move and greet the person you believe holds something against you, and see what happens. You may be amazed by the reaction you get.

Show Yourself Friendly

Another common problem in the church is loneliness. So many Christians complain that they have no friends, but in many cases it is because they do not show themselves friendly.

Proverbs 18:34 says: “A man that has friends must show himself friendly: and there is a friend that sticks closer than a brother.”

Jesus is the friend who sticks closer than a brother, and we would do well to follow His example. Jesus was kind, forgiving, generous, compassionate, and straight-forward with people. Because He reached out to others, they reached back and desired to be with Him, even in simple things like sharing a meal.

So, if you have no friends, it may be time to confront the problem head-on. Be bold next Sunday, and ask someone to join you for lunch after church, even if it’s just a trip to a fast-food joint.

Make a new friend, and then reach out and spend time with someone different every few weeks.

Be sure to pay attention to your old friends, but never stop making new friends. You are only able to be used by God as much you are willing to be stretched and associate with a variety of people.

It's time for all of us to be honest and look at our fellowship in the church. Is it superficial? Is it sporadic? Or is it non-existent? Identify your problem, and then begin to pray about how it can be resolved.

We need one another, and so much more as the return of Jesus draws closer, and things in the world intensify. Don't be a loner in a crowd anymore, but reach out and be friendly today!

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