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Kelly Deatherage

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Welcome One Another *as* Christ has Welcomed You

BY KELLY DEATHERAGE

“Welcome one another, therefore, just as Christ has welcomed you, for the glory of God” (Rom 15:7).¹ Coming near to the end of Paul’s letter to the church in Rome, this verse is easy to overlook as a kind of throwaway statement, similar to “Greet one another with a holy kiss” or “I urge so-and-so and so-and-so to get along.”

Even those who refuse quite so flippant a view of scripture will concede that this is one of those “how to live” kind of statements that seems secondary to such soaring passages as Rom 8:1, where Paul builds his case for Christianity to a rousing crescendo.

Yet as our congregation has taken this verse as our current year’s theme for ministry and community life, I’ve come to recognize the profound meaning, the life-changing implications for ministry contained in these few, almost off-hand, words. In fact, I’d argue that in this verse—in a life lived welcoming others as Christ has welcomed us—we find the embodiment of the theology that Paul carefully constructs in his first eleven chapters.

First, the structure of the book bears this out:

1:1–15 Greetings and introduction
1:16–11:36 Theology; a careful examination of who and what humankind is in relationship to God as Creator, Judge, and Savior

12:1–15:13 Practical application; how believers live out those theological understandings
15:14–16:16 Personal and closing material

In such a structure,² this verse, coming as it does in 15:7 at the conclusion of the life application section, suggests by placement alone that it is Paul’s culminating message, the point to which the book builds.

More important for ministry, however, is how this verse encompasses so many themes from the book of Romans. Consider grace. God’s incomprehensible mercy in redeeming humanity both leaves us in grateful awe of Christ’s welcome to us and becomes the standard by which we welcome others. Likewise, as we are justified by faith, we then welcome others on the basis of faith alone, not demanding certain actions or attributes or attitudes before we extend welcome to them. Also, in Paul’s contrast between the way of the flesh and the way of the Spirit, we can see that living according to the flesh leads constantly to measuring performance, competing, dividing, excluding. In contrast, when we live according to the Spirit, our focus is upon our common Father, and our hearts are unified in his mutual welcome. Later in the book, Paul’s thorough discussion of weak and strong Christians—whether read as Jew and Gentile in the first century or a twenty-first-century dichotomy—provides a glimpse of the

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way Christ's welcome impacts life in the body. That same practical application of welcome between strong and weak applies whether the issue is meat offered to idols or praise teams in worship.

However, building a case for the importance of welcoming others as Christ welcomed us cannot substitute for faithfully living in that way of welcome. And it is a demanding way. Combing the lice from the head of someone else's child, sharing a meal with a young couple struggling with the wife's inoperable brain cancer, listening lovingly hour after hour to an embittered individual, entering another's ethnic or socioeconomic culture with an open mind and an open heart—welcoming in this way is not easy. But when I remember "Not my will but yours be done," I remember how much was demanded of the one who welcomed me.

How much easier if Paul had written, "Welcome one another as long as you see some progress." Instead, we are called to welcome as Christ welcomed us. That means we may offer a cup of cold water, only to find it thrown back in our faces. Yet that doesn't prevent us from refilling the cup again . . . and again . . . and again. When faced with fellow Christians—others whom Christ has welcomed—who are caught in the grip of addiction, whose personalities are disordered or just plain difficult, who exhibit an unrelenting attitude of judgment and superiority, or who seem caught in other intractable circumstances, our inclination is to walk away: "We've done all we can. They'll never change. Why bother?" And yet the echo we dare not imagine would be that of the Son: "Father, you've done all you can. They'll never change. Why bother?" How utterly grateful I am that Christ did not walk away.

Living a life of welcome also requires us to scrutinize our motives. Our ministry—whether the service of paid staff or an individual Christian engaged

in day-to-day faithful living—too easily can become the counsel and actions of "spiritual heavies," who dispense our ministry to our more fleshly fellows. That danger (which may be inherent in ministry that is thought of as a profession) is overcome by focusing upon how Christ welcomed us—how he relinquished all claims as the ultimate spiritual heavy in exchange for touching lepers and washing dung-encrusted feet.

Too often, our reasons for extending welcome to others are centered in ourselves. Even if our actions seem honorable or merely benign, our thoughts condemn us: "If I deliver Meals on Wheels, then I'll be seen as a servant." "Let's invite the Collinses over for dinner soon, and maybe they'll include us when they watch the Academy Awards on their big-screen TV." "Whenever I see Debbie taking care of all those extra kids, I feel so guilty. I guess I'll volunteer to take the boys one night a week." But when we welcome as Christ did, our thoughts are transformed by his: "Do not let your left hand know what your right hand is doing." "When you give a banquet, invite the poor, the crippled, the lame, and the blind."

As we daily embrace Christ's welcome and share Paul's assurance that nothing can separate us from the love of God in Christ Jesus, the Spirit transforms us and purifies our motives for ministry. That's vital, because the way of welcome is not one of casual greeting that we can achieve with our own resources. Welcome, instead, implies opening the whole heart to another. If I am to welcome as Christ welcomed, I cannot withhold myself any more than he withheld himself from me. In welcoming others in their brokenness, I must not only admit to my own brokenness but fully own it, knowing that Jesus himself entered into our broken state and then transformed it into glory.

When we humble ourselves to the point that we can truly embrace our brokenness, we then can respond to Paul's appeal to present ourselves as living sacrifices. Paul is not suggesting a sincere commitment or urging a real investment of ourselves; he begs us to be burned up for the sake of Christ. Not even easy to say, much less to do. Yet I have experienced the paradox of finding energy to spend myself for the sake of another only by offering myself to be completely spent for the sake of Christ.

In contrast, when I attempt under my own power to go to those places to which a life of welcome leads, I find myself quickly exhausted, weary, depleted, hopeless, defeated. But when I give myself to be used as God's instrument of welcome, I find that I understand what it means to be "perplexed, but not driven to despair; . . . struck down, but not destroyed" (2 Cor 4:8-9). One of the blessings of that complete surrender is that when we place ourselves where Jesus placed himself, we find there his closest companionship.

We need to be certain, though, that we do not mistake ourselves for the means of redemption, but remain a tool to be used by the Holy One of God. Only he has the power to save, and only he knows the hearts of men and women. Furthermore, what God seeks—and sees—in the obsessive-compulsive or the mentally disabled or the person on the next

chair at church may not be ours to know. What we do know, however, is that each one has been welcomed by Christ and that our role is thus likewise to welcome, so that God will be glorified.

KELLY DEATHERAGE is Director of Public Relations at Cascade College, Portland Oregon, and a member of the East County Church of Christ.

Notes

¹ Scripture quotations are from the New Revised Standard Version (NRSV).

² This brief outline is similar to that used by Joseph A. Fitzmyer in the Romans volume of the Anchor Bible commentary series. The view of Fitzmyer (see especially pp. 79-80) and similar theologians, which grants more weight and purpose to the later chapters of Romans, seems a better fit with a general reading of the book than does the assumption made by earlier scholars (such as Dodd, Sanday, and Headlam) that these last chapters are merely afterthought.

Notes from "All Israel Will Be Saved"

¹ Rom 11:1.

² Rom 11:2.

³ Rom 11:24.

⁴ Rom 11:28.

⁵ Rom 11:29.

⁶ Rom 11:29.

⁷ Rom 9:6-13.

⁸ Ps 136:10-15. Scripture quotations are from the New American Standard Bible (NASB).

⁹ Rom 9:14-18.

¹⁰ Ps 136:16-22.

¹¹ Gen 17:14.

¹² Mic 6:8.

¹³ Rom 3:2.

¹⁴ Rom 11:7, 25.

¹⁵ Rom 11:8, 10.

¹⁶ Rom 11:8.

¹⁷ Rom 11:11.

¹⁸ Rom 11:17, 20.

¹⁹ See especially Mark 2:1-3, 6.

²⁰ Isaiah 52-53.

²¹ See Richard T. Hughes, "Why Restorationists Don't Fit the Evangelical Mold; Why Churches of Christ Increasingly Do," in *Re-Forming the Center: American Protestantism, 1900 to the Present*, ed. Douglas Jacobsen and William Vance Trollinger Jr. (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1998), 211. For a counterview, see David Edwin Harrell Jr., *The Churches of Christ in the Twentieth Century: Homer Hailey's Personal Journey of Faith* (Tuscaloosa: University of Alabama Press, 2000), 57-71.

²² See C. Leonard Allen, *The Cruciform Church* (Abilene: ACU Press, 1990), 52-57.

²³ Consider Michael Casey, *Saddlebags, City Streets, and Cyberspace* (Abilene: ACU Press, 1995), 91-101. Casey discusses the rise of the political pulpit through G. C. Brewer, "an orator in search of a cause."

²⁴ Richard T. Hughes, *Reviving the Ancient Faith: The Story of the Churches of Christ in America* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1996), 278.

²⁵ This is a paraphrase of Robert Baird's 1844 assessment of the movement. Cited in Richard T. Hughes, "Are Restorationists Evangelicals?" in *The Variety of American Evangelicalism*, ed. Donald W. Dayton and Robert K. Johnston (Knoxville: University of Tennessee Press, 1991), 114.

²⁶ See Allen, 35-38.

²⁷ Hughes, "Are Restorationists Evangelicals?" 116.

²⁸ *Ibid.*, 119-20.

²⁹ The biblical reference is Matt 23:23.

³⁰ Rom 11:25.

³¹ I am following Luke Timothy Johnson, *Reading Romans* (New York: Crossroad, 1992), especially 171-75.

³² Rom 11:25.

³³ Rom 11:26.

³⁴ Rom 4:17.

³⁵ Rom 9:17-18.

³⁶ Rom 9:22-24.

³⁷ Rom 11:11-24.

³⁸ I have in mind the poignant parable of judgment in Matt 25:31-46.

³⁹ Rom 11:7.

⁴⁰ Rom 9:31.