

Holy Kissing and Christian Love

Romans 16:16

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Today's message is about kissing. You heard it, kissing. Now I have the teenagers' attention. Perhaps some dating singles as well. Likely everyone. How can we have a message in church on kissing? We can because the Bible talks a lot about kissing and specifically our series in Romans includes one standout verse in chapter 16, verse 16, which urges us to do a lot of kissing in church.

What kind of kissing are we talking about? There are different kinds of kissing. I'd urge you to realize this lest you confuse your girlfriend with grandma. That could make for a very awkward family moment. We instinctively realize that kissing comes in different forms and is meant for different purposes.

However, while we instinctively know that, we've likely never seriously thought about it or enjoyed an entire sermon on the subject of kissing. Today is your lucky day! I can hear some of you thinking, *if they start kissing at Bethel, we're so out of here.*

Besides stirring interest in our singles ministry, on the whole, this introduction is simply meant to get you curious about the role of affection in authentic Christianity. Our text today is a short and simple one:

"Greet one another with a holy kiss. All the churches of Christ greet you" (Romans 16:16 ESV).

The repeated word is "greet." The second greeting is a general greeting to Rome from all the churches. This greeting is from a distance and is based on the unity of all true Christian churches in union with Christ. It is *"all the churches of Christ"* (emphasis mine). Our belonging to Christ means that we also belong to one another. In a sense, there is only one true church—the universal church of all the redeemed ransomed by the blood of Christ. But notice it's in the plural. *"All the churches of Christ greet you."* This references all the local expressions of the global church, of which Bethel Church is one.

Perhaps it's like a hologram. Every part of a hologram contains the whole image of the hologram. I understand you can cut off a small portion of a hologram and still see the whole hologram through that small little part. Similarly, every true local church is a small part of the whole global church. Part of the church is here and, in a sense, all of it is here too. Paul says, all the local expressions of Christ's church greet you, dear Roman church of Jesus.

So, the context of 16:16 is relational. It is a relational greeting. When do we do our greetings? At the start of a relational time. What we do at the end of relational time we don't call a greeting; we call that goodbye. He could have said, *Say goodbye to one another with a holy kiss.* There's nothing wrong with that, and often in family settings, we will both *greet* with physical affection and *goodbye* with physical affection. If it's going to be a long time until we see each other, that goodbye affection can linger. Have you ever had it were you were saying goodbye and your sense of how long it should go was different from the other person? We have that awkward, *OK, OK. Well, alright. We need to go.* And yet Aunt Lulu keeps holding on....

"Greet one another." To greet someone is to acknowledge them; to respect them; to accept them. It means, *I know you and I care for you*. This is what makes it so embarrassing when you are in some crowded place and you see someone you know and you greet them, *John, it's so good to see you!* Only to discover...it isn't John. It's someone you don't know at all. Then what do we say? *Oh, I'm sorry, I thought I knew you.*

Expressing emotional acceptance to someone we don't know feels very awkward. Why? We are saying something by the greeting that isn't true. The greeting reserved for a dear friend or family member is completely inappropriate for someone we don't know or hold in affection.

Is the opposite true? To be distant from someone you hold in affection is also weird. This is the point that your passive-aggressive family member is trying to make. *Yes, you are my brother or daughter, but I will withhold the affection that our relationship calls for until I get my way.* Passive-aggressive manipulation is entirely built on the expectation and even entitlement we feel to affection within family or friends. If we didn't expect or need it, passive-aggressive manipulation would lose all its power.

While Paul doesn't say it, this is why he commands the Roman Christians to *greet* each other and *kiss* each other. Withholding affection from a brother or sister in Christ is denying the spiritual truth. *Just like the churches belong to each other in Christ, so also individual Christians belong to each other in Christ.* To greet one another is to affirm the deeply spiritual relationship we have with each other via the eternal union with share in Jesus Christ. This brings us to kissing.

Kissing in Biblical History

Did you know we find kissing all over in the Bible? Here are some highlights:

Intimacy restored	Joseph and his brothers	Genesis 45:15
Reconciliation	Jacob/Esau, Prodigal	Genesis 33:4
Goodbyes	Paul and Ephesian Elders	Acts 20
Devotion	Prostitute at Jesus feet	Luke 7:36ff
Sexual	Wayward wife, Lover	Proverbs/Song of Songs

What we find in each case is that the act of kissing symbolized some level of intimacy between those who participated in the kiss—between friends, family, and lovers. In fact, Song of Solomon describes in detail a kind of kissing we most closely associate with the country of France.

Kissing in the Bible is clearly meant as a personal expression of love and acceptance. This is why what Judas did to Jesus was so treacherous. *"While he was still speaking, there came a crowd, and the man called Judas, one of the twelve, was leading them. He drew near to Jesus to kiss him, but Jesus said to him, 'Judas, would you betray the Son of Man with a kiss?'"* (Luke 22:47-48)

Jesus points out Judas' distortion of what a kiss means by betraying the Son of God with something that meant closeness and friendship. It's sad that perhaps the most famous kiss of history was an act of betrayal. If you'll indulge me a moment, I dabble in writing poetry sometimes, and some years ago I drafted a poem on Judas betraying Jesus with a kiss. I refreshed it to share with you.

The Kiss

*I made your lips for greater purpose than this,
O my child think before you give me this kiss.*

*I remember those lips that would quite nearly break,
And the smile they spread as my bread you would take.*

*I remember how they whistled as the Sea fell still,
And your head bow'd down at my powerful will.*

*I've seen those lips laugh as we walked on our way,
"Rabbi, you're funny" they'd jokingly say.*

*Those lips preached good news throughout Galilee,
That I was Messiah who'd set all men free.*

*I've seen those lips tense, with Mary's cracked vase,
Her love for me, was to you, such a waste.*

*But how I was hurt when I heard your lips say,
"I will betray him to you if you pay me that day."*

*Tonight, with the basin I bathed your feet too,
I knew that your treason meant a crucified doom.*

*Did I see your lips quiver as I washed your feet new?
Did your heart tremble, knowing what you'd soon do?*

*O, Judas, my friend but now my betrayer,
My disciple, my companion, but now my full hater?*

*Not with sword or letter do you come to do this,
How can you betray the Son of Man with a kiss?*

Lord, help prepare us for Easter week and the betrayal of Jesus with a kiss.

Kissing in the New Testament

This greeting with a kiss concept is surprisingly prevalent in the New Testament. Here are verses that say this:

- "Greet one another with the kiss of love" (1 Peter 5:14).
- "Greet all the brothers with a holy kiss" (1 Thessalonians 5:26).
- "Greet one another with a holy kiss" (2 Corinthians 13:12).
- "Greet one another with a holy kiss" (1 Corinthians 16:20).
- "Greet one another with a holy kiss" (Romans 16:16).

The kiss of greeting was cultural

To greet someone with a kiss was the culture of the Greco-Roman world at that time. That may seem weird to us, and if you haven't traveled cross-culturally, you may not realize that not everybody expresses friendship the way that we do. Many practice today a cultural kiss.

For instance, on a trip I once took to Egypt, our tour guide explained that there is an Upper Egypt form of friendship kissing and a Lower Egypt form of kissing. In one, you kiss three times, start on one cheek, do the other, then return to the first. But in the other region, you only do two kisses. He said it was offensive if you did the Upper Egypt kiss in Lower Egypt. For some, this kissing thing is pretty important, and culture matters and sets the rules.

To understand Romans 16:16, we have to understand the culture of the day. For example, In Jewish practice, a host was required to place his hand on any guest's shoulder and give him the "kiss of peace." We find this referred to in the New Testament when Jesus goes to the home of Simon the Pharisee. "*You gave me no kiss, but from the time I came in she has not ceased to kiss my feet*" (Luke 7:45). A kiss on the cheek was the socially accepted way of greeting one another and is to this day a part of the social fabric and expectation of many societies.

But there is a unique twist to the kiss of Romans 16:16. Notice the adjective, "*Greet one another with a **holy** kiss*" (emphasis mine).

The Christian Kiss Must be "Holy"

I think we all realize the affectionate kisses between husband and wife are holy; Hebrews 13:4 makes that clear. But that is not the kind of holy kiss that Paul is addressing. These are commands to the members of the church in how they relate to one another. There is nothing sensual about this kiss. My understanding was that it was not done with the opposite sex.

So, what would transform the social custom of a greeting kiss into a sanctified and holy kiss?

A holy kiss symbolizes the mutual love for Christ and for one another

One commentator pointed out that there are three parties involved in a holy kiss;¹ God, and the two that are kissing. It is a mutual love for God that generates a love for one another which expresses itself in holy affection. This is why Peter calls it "the kiss of love." It is a kiss of mutual loves. We mutually love God and we love each other. In this way, the gospel of Jesus amplifies the cultural kiss and infuses it with meaning.

He turns the cultural kiss into a Christian kiss

It is a theological and gospel kiss. In this, Christianity does with the kiss what it does with so many "normal" aspects of life and society. A family becomes a gospel family as Jesus is enthroned in the home. Work becomes an act of worship as the gospel allows me to do my labor for God's glory. We are new creations in Christ and everything we do is enriched with significance as we connect it with God's glory. That is true for the kiss of greeting. These Roman Christians probably greeted many people in their life and family with a kiss. But when they greeted a brother or sister in Christ, the kiss became *holy* as the kiss expressed deep Christian truth about relationship with one another.

¹ Hendriksen, *Romans*, p. 508.

To Whom Should I Give a “Holy Kiss”?

The Christian kiss is reserved for Christian relationships. I can kiss anyone but only with a Christian does the kiss mean, *we are brothers in Christ*. “Therefore welcome one another as Christ has welcomed you, for the glory of God” (Romans 15:7). Our affectional welcome is to be with anyone Christ has also affectionately welcomed. In the spirit of Romans 16:16, *kiss anyone Christ has kissed*. If Christ will kiss them, I don’t need to be more holy than the holy Son of God. Kiss those whom Christ has kissed.

So along with other famous “one anothers” in the New Testament—love one another, forgive one another—we add this one: greet and be warmly affectionate for one another. If you are God’s child, you’re my brother, let me kiss you now!

Holy Kissing and Christian Community

Here’s the question you all have been wondering, *are we going to start kissing here at Bethel?* Again, half of you are like, *if they start kissing around here, I’m so out of here!* Perhaps a higher percentage than that! In the first century, kissing was the clearest visible cultural expression of internal spiritual affection. Whatever that is in whatever culture the Christian is in, do it sincerely and authentically and robustly with one another. What is it for us? Culturally, we shake hands. Perhaps do a side hug. It’s anything from a handshake to bringing it in for a hug. Whatever it is, do it sincerely out of a true Christian affection for a fellow believer.

This is not to be fake. This is what eventually happened in the early church. The kiss was a part of the liturgy. They would take time in each service, after prayer, for the kiss of peace. By the second century, it was done each week immediately before the offertory. They did it at baptisms, ordinations, and marriages (*you may now, kiss everybody here*). It became so abused that Clement of Alexandria reported that in the late second century, “Some do nothing but fill the Churches with noise of kissing.”² Paul didn’t want some fake affection; he just wanted brothers and sisters to show visible signs of affection.

Kiss each other is God telling us to love each other and show it! Show it in physically and culturally appropriate ways. Phillips translates this, *give hearty handshakes all around*. We could translate it, *give bro hugs all around*. Just to be clear, physical affection should be reserved to same-sex friendships. When with an opposite sex, please err on the safe side. There’s nothing worse in church than that full-on frontal hugger. Please, please, no.

This pandemic is driving us crazy with these things. We want to be close and physically affectionate. Elbow bumps don’t quite get there, but God understands the special circumstances. Spiritual kissing goes beyond the act to any expression of affection. Acts of kindness. Words of encouragement. Serving one another. Reaching out to each other in difficult times. Christian, are you a good kisser? Do the brothers and sisters around you feel and sense from you genuine care?

Over the years I have observed many church folks who struggle with this. They were burned at a previous church or they didn’t grow up around affectionate love. Not everyone is as warm and cuddly by personality. We need to respect other people’s comfort level, but I urge all of us to lean this direction. Not less but more expressive Christian love.

² Clement of Alexandria as quoted by William Robertson Nicoll, ed., *The Expositor’s Greek Testament* (London: Hodder and Stoughton, 1910), 80.

The church is God's alternate and redeemed society created in the midst of a corrupt humanity. Where do people go to feel cared for? The bar? The night club? In a lonely world of isolation and self-worship, do you see how the church should provide the kind of atmosphere of love and welcoming that draws people in? Let's be that kind of church. Jesus said, *"By this all people will know that you are my disciples, if you have love for one another"* (John 13:35).

Could God use a message on kissing to draw you to put your faith in Christ and to be welcomed with affection into the fellowship of fellow Christians? I think he could. I urge you to see yourself as God sees you, both as a sinner deserving judgment and a sinner who can receive his grace. Trust in Jesus dying on the cross for your sins, make him the Lord and Savior of your life. We will welcome you here as a brother or sister. We will welcome you with affection and Christian love.

May God's love for us be on full display in the way we love each other, and may the Bethelonians greet one another with a holy kiss.

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