

EXHORTATION AND ASSURANCE (Rom. 16: 16)

By
Ken Green

“Greet one another with a holy kiss. The churches of Christ salute you.”

After saying “Greet” thirteen times, Paul now urges them to greet one another with a kiss. A holy kiss. So what should we think about the “holy kiss”?

This traditional greeting, the kiss, is mentioned four times in Paul's epistles (1 Cor. 16:20; 2 Cor. 13:12; 1 Thess. 5:26; and here). It is also mentioned once by Peter who calls it the “kiss of love” (1 Peter 5:14). It is always in the context of closing salutations and never in those sections of the epistles where doctrinal matters are treated.

It was a widespread custom in that social culture to kiss friends and guests. When Jesus was invited to dinner by Simon the Pharisee, Simon didn't kiss him, but a woman anointed his feet and kissed them. And when Simon criticized Jesus for receiving this from a “sinful woman,” Jesus retorted, “I entered your house; you gave me no kiss, but from the time I came in she has not ceased to kiss my feet” (Luke 7:45). It was a gracious custom. That's why it wasn't strange when Judas greeted Jesus with a kiss (Luke 22:48). It was a common greeting.

Paul said that the kiss bestowed by Christians should be a holy kiss. There are many ways for a kiss to be unholy. Judas's kiss of betrayal was certainly unholy. The kiss of adultery is unholy. The kiss of fornication is unholy. The kiss of homosexuality is unholy. The kiss of seduction is unholy. The kiss of hypocrisy is unholy.

But the holy kiss is pure and spiritual affection. This affection is a family affection, not a romantic one. The holy kiss is physically demonstrative, not just words. Healthy families are not afraid to touch each other. It's the mark of unselfconscious security and love and warmth. When the prodigal returned home his father “kissed him.”

As Moses Lard said, “The apostle ... did not create the custom; for it was prevalent at the time. He meant merely to purify it...” J. W. McGarvey, in his comments on 1 Cor. 16:20, stated: “Paul did not, by this command, or create a church ordinance or ceremony; nor did he even create a new custom. He merely injected a spiritual virtue into an old, established, time-honored custom. The Bible was not written as a work on etiquette, nor was it intended in this case that the Syrian and Grecian customs should become universal.”

I find the conclusion of these writers a reasonable one. In our American culture, we fulfill, I believe, the intended requirement when we make our handclasp or occasional hug a warm, sincere, and pure greeting.

J. B. Phillips, in his paraphrase of the passage, says” “Give one another a hearty handshake all round for my sake.” Perhaps that’s taking too much liberty and is certainly more commentary than translation, but it probably catches the spirit of Paul’s admonition. There may be cultures and situations where a kiss would not communicate what Paul desires. Hugging might. Handshaking might.

Greetings from the churches in general were included: “The churches of Christ salute you.” This was likely to assure the brethren in Rome that they were in the hearts, minds, and prayers of brethren elsewhere.

The statement serves to reveal that “church of Christ” is a scriptural designation for a congregation of the Lord’s people. If a plurality of congregations is called “churches of Christ,” then a single congregation may obviously be designated a “church of Christ.”

But there are other descriptions of the church provided in the Scriptures. There are pro’s and con’s as to the tradition we have developed of using “church of Christ” almost exclusively; totally so as far as the legal title is concerned.

I recognize some of the problems that a diversification of scriptural names would create. But personally, I believe the advantages would outweigh the disadvantages. One great advantage is that such would underscore our insistence that we are not denominational in organization. It would also likely prove an asset in many places where prejudice is strong against the “Church of Christ,” in reaching people with the pure gospel of salvation and the truth regarding the church. These are my opinions. I have no intentions of mounting a campaign to bring such about, and would not have a clue of how to proceed if I harbored such intentions.

(Editor’s Note: Ken Green was a prolific writer. He wrote a series of articles on Romans. It is my understanding they will be printed in book form sometime in the future. I believe his study of “the holy kiss” is accurate. D.T.)