

The Holy Kiss

LaGrave Avenue Christian Reformed Church

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2 Corinthians 13:11-13

I went to Cuba back in 2015 with the members of our Cuba committee. It was a wonderful trip. I loved visiting this new country, and I especially enjoyed visiting the Christian Reformed Churches that LaGrave sponsors and meeting the members there. I actually preached in a couple of those churches. There was, however, one aspect of Cuban culture, and Cuban church culture that made me deeply uncomfortable. People over there greet each other with a kiss. This was totally foreign to a nice Christian Reformed Dutch boy like me. I had to be taught how to hug, so this kiss thing involved advanced skills that I did not have. I would be standing in the narthex of these little churches and here would come a 70 year old Cuban women, maybe 5 foot tall, speaking no English whatsoever. She'd be coming toward me and I would be in a blind panic. I'd be smiling on the outside, but inside I'd be saying: *"Oh no! Here it comes! Which way do I go with my head? Am I supposed to actually physically touch the cheek with my lips, or is it an air kiss. What do I do with my hands!?!?"* "I survived, but to this day I'm convinced that there are some Cuban women laughing together about that excruciatingly awkward kiss they got from that skinny American pastor.

But I think you should know that although you might be uncomfortable with kissing, the apostle Paul felt differently. The apostle Paul seemed to like kissing. I say that because 4 times at the end of one of his letters he tells us that we should be kissing in church. In our passage, he tells the Corinthian church: "Greet one another with the Holy Kiss." He said the same thing at the end of his first letter to the Corinthians. He also says it at the end of Romans and at the end of his first letter to the Thessalonians. And all four times he mentions it, he doesn't mention it in passing; he makes it a command. "Here's what I want you to do" he says, "greet one another with the holy kiss." That seems to make it pretty important. I challenge you to find another command that Paul repeats four times. And then if Paul's four mentions of holy kissing weren't enough, Peter mentions it too! Go to the end of 1 Peter you will find the same command. "Greet one another with the kiss of love" says Peter. So the command is in the New Testament 5 times! Which begs the obvious question: why don't we do this? Why don't we greet each other with the holy kiss? We could, you know. We could do the holy kiss. You know how at the end of the service we shake your hand as we walk out the door, instead of a handshake we could follow Paul's suggestion. We could start tonight. As you file out we could greet each other with the holy kiss. Would you like that? Me neither. Don't worry, I'm not starting a campaign to bring back the holy kiss, but I do think that it is something that deserves to be better understood, so tonight we are going to reflect on why Paul wanted churches to practice it and what role it played in the life of a church. There's actually quite a bit of kissing attested in scripture and I can identify at least four different kinds.

First there is the ever popular romantic kiss. Yes, the romantic kiss is in the Bible although all the mentions of it are in one book. Can you guess which one? Song of Solomon. *"The scent of your breath is like apples, your kisses are like the best wine that goes down smoothly, gliding over lips and teeth."* This is obviously a very popular kind of kiss and has been for as long as people can remember, but I think we're quite safe in saying: it's not the holy kiss Paul is talking about here.

Second, the Bible mentions the kiss of submission. Sometimes one person kissed another as a sign of reverence and respect. Psalm 2:12 mentions kissing – maybe you remember that – it warns all the rebellious kings of the earth who set themselves against the Lord and his anointed that they should kiss his feet lest he rise up and destroy them. They should kiss the son as a sign of submission to him. And then in the New Testament, there is the story of the sinful woman who was forgiven by Jesus who comes to Jesus and bathes his feet in oil and covers his feet with kisses. Her kisses show reverent submission. This kind of kissing still continues today. What are you supposed to do when you meet the pope? You kneel before him and you kiss his ring. That's a sign of reverent submission to him and to the office he represents. So that's another form of the kiss – but it's not the one Paul is thinking of here.

A third kind of Biblical kiss is the hello, goodbye kiss. Scripture shows us lots of stories where people kiss when they meet and kiss when they part. This isn't a kiss of submission; it's a kiss between equals. So, for example when Elijah calls Elisha, Elisha says: "Let me go and kiss my father goodbye." And in Acts 20 when Paul gets on the boat for his trip back to Jerusalem, the Ephesian elders meet him on the beach and they tearfully kiss him farewell. And even Judas' kiss is this kind of kiss. When he meets Jesus in the garden and kisses him on the cheek, he is offering the kind of "hello" greeting that people often gave in those days. That kind of kiss is still around. That's the kind of kissing practiced by my friends in Cuba. The kiss as a form of greeting and departure is still a very common thing all over the world. But it's not the kind of kiss Paul is talking about here. I know you might think so because Paul mentions the kiss in the context of greeting, but Paul has more in mind than a simple kiss hello.

The fourth and last kind of Biblical kiss is the kiss of forgiveness and reconciliation. Where do we see this kind of kiss? In the story of the Prodigal Son for one. What does the father do when he sees his son coming home from the far country? He runs to meet him and he kisses him. That kiss is more than a greeting; it's a sign that all is forgiven. It's a sign that he is welcome back into his father's house. Or do you remember what happened when Jacob and Esau met each other again all those years after Jacob had stolen the birthright? Jacob is really nervous about meeting his brother. He thinks Esau is still angry. He thinks Esau will come out against him with horsemen and kill him. Jacob sends all kinds of presents to Esau before the meeting to try to soften him up. But when the meeting actually occurs, what does Esau do? He embraces his brother and kisses him, and they both weep. Esau comes off as a nice guy in that story. That's the kiss of forgiveness, the kiss of reconciliation. One more example of this kind of kiss is found in the Joseph stories. When Joseph finally reveals to his brothers who he is, when he reveals to them that he is not just an Egyptian ruler that he is in fact their long lost brother, Genesis 45 tells us that he embraced his brothers and he wept and he kissed them. That is the kiss of reconciliation and forgiveness. When Paul calls us to greet one another with the holy kiss, this is the kind of kissing he's talking about. He's talking about the kiss of forgiveness and reconciliation. He's talking about the kiss as a sign of old walls broken down and new community established.

How can we be sure that this is the kind of kiss Paul is talking about? There are a couple of reasons. First, look at the context of the passage. What is Paul talking about before he gives the command to greet one another with the holy kiss? In verse 11 Paul says: "Strive for full restoration. Encourage one another. Be of one mind. Live in peace." Paul is focusing on reconciliation. He's focusing on reconciliation because the Corinthian church is a church that had trouble getting along. Maybe you remember how in 1 Corinthians Paul mentioned how they were dividing up into factions: some following Peter, some following Paul, and some following Apollos? Paul pushes the holy kiss as a way of breaking down the walls that divided them. In

fact all four times Paul ends a letter with the command to greet each other with a holy kiss, he's writing to a church which has trouble getting along.

Second, I think the kiss is the forgiveness kind, because we know how the kiss was used in the early church. In the early church the holy kiss was part of the liturgy. It was part of the liturgy of the Lord's Supper. When they got together to celebrate the Lord's Supper, just before they actually sat down and shared the bread and the wine together, the members of the congregation would kiss each other. They even had a name for it: the *osculum pascis* – the kiss of peace. The holy kiss. It was part of the liturgy of the Lord's Supper. It was a way of showing that they had nothing against their brothers and sisters before they ate the supper. Do you remember how in Matthew 5 Jesus says: "Be reconciled to your brother before you approach the altar?" This is a little like that. The holy kiss made sure that this was a dinner of genuine fellowship and not a dinner of animosity. There's something powerful about imagining one of those early church congregations embracing and kissing one another before the Lord's Supper. Society was so divided by class and race in those days: slaves and masters, Jews and Gentiles, rich and poor. There's something powerful about imagining coming to communion at the Corinthian church and seeing a female slave embracing her master and kissing him with the kiss of forgiveness, of reconciliation, not a kiss of submission or reverence, but the two of them embracing as equals, the two of them equally standing in need of forgiveness. Or to see a Jewish man and a Gentile man, people who would never have even eaten together, now embracing each other as brothers. The holy kiss must have seemed like a miracle in those days. It must have seemed to turn the world upside down. The holy kiss represents a call to community of the deepest kind. It's a call to be the kind of community that practices, physically practices, the deep unity we have in Jesus Christ our Lord.

The *osculum pascis* was practiced for a few hundred years in the church, but then it fell out of favor. People were worried that outsiders would get the wrong idea. And there were also concerns about the kiss being misused. Of course there's nothing inherent to a kiss itself that makes this work. We don't need to express this unity through actual physical smooching. When I was at the monastery we celebrated communion every day in the morning and in the brother's celebration, right before the actual communion we would pass the peace. We would grab each other rather formally at the shoulder and lean in – first on one side, then the other. That was a vestige of the holy kiss. In church I served on summer assignment, the holy kiss was symbolized a different way. Before every council meeting, every elder and deacon would shake every other elder's hand. We'd all go round the table shaking before we got down to business. That was a way of saying however much we may disagree in this meeting – and those old Dutchmen could really disagree – we are one in Christ. So the physical kiss itself isn't absolutely necessary.

There's actually only one thing absolutely necessary to the kind of union Paul urges in the Holy Kiss. It's not found in the kiss; it's found in the blessing that follows. The power that binds us together as a family does not come from the form of our greeting, the power comes from the grace of our Lord Jesus Christ, the love of God and the fellowship of the Holy Spirit. The grace that forgives all things, the love that endures all things, the fellowship that holds us together in the midst of all things. The holiness in the holy kiss, or the holy handshake isn't from us, it's from Him. So, the next time I, or any of the other pastors, raise our hands to bless you with his grace of our Lord Jesus and love of God and the fellowship of the Holy Spirit, and then you go out of the sanctuary and into the narthex to greet one another, remember what our Lord has sacrificed to create this community. And give thanks for the kind of forgiving, committed, resilient community the Lord is creating in you, in us.