

A Holy Kiss

Romans 16:16

“Salute one another with a holy kiss. All the churches of Christ salute you.”

Authorized fellowship is the focus of Romans chapters 12-16. The apostle Paul precisely identifies the bounds of fellowship in areas of adiaphora (matters of indifference) in Romans 14 and fellowship in the area of doctrine in Romans 16. The text of Romans 14-16 demands that the Christian distinguish between areas of adiaphora and doctrine. This brief article shall examine the passage in Romans 16:16 regarding giving one another a “*holy kiss*” in light of our responsibility to hold to the “*pattern of sound words*” (II Tim. 1:13). Romans 16:16a is a direct commandment and thereby deserves our attention.

Lexicons on the word “kiss” (*philema*):

- A. “The kiss with which Christian brethren give expression to their intimate fellowship...” (AG 859).
- B. “The kiss with which, as a sign of fraternal affection, Christians were accustomed to welcome or dismiss their companions in the faith” (Thayer 654).
- C. “A kiss” (LS 862).

Use of the word “kiss” (*philema*) in the NT:

The word *philema* is found in Luke 7:45; 22:48; Acts 20:37; Rom. 16:16; I Cor. 16:20; II Cor. 13:12; I Thess. 5:26; and I Pet. 5:14. Read each of these verses for a comparison to the word used in Romans 16:16. The word “*salute*” is found in connection with many of the listed verses. To “*salute*” (*aspazomai*) = “to welcome kindly, bid welcome, greet” (LS 124). Apparently brethren who shared a mutual love for truth would “greet” each other with a kiss in these early church days. Note that the apostle John commands Christians to “give no greeting” to those who refuse to walk in the teachings of Jesus Christ (cf. II Jn. 9-11). The kiss then was a symbol of fellowship commanded by Paul and Peter through the Spirit for Christians. Should the Christian today give each other a “holy kiss” as a sign of our fellowship and mutual love for truth?

Bauer states, “the early Christians expressed the intimate fellowship of the reconciled community” (pg. 859)... “The practice gradually died out in the West after the 13th century” (ISBE, Vol. 3; pp. 44).

Consider Gal. 2:9

Paul and Barnabas were given “*the right hands of fellowship*” by James, Cephas, and John (Gal. 2:9). The words “*right hand*” (*dexios*) = “used in welcoming... to salute by offering the right hand... the right hand given as a pledge or assurance... having exchanged assurances, made a treaty...” (LS 179). This right hand extended for the purpose of a pledge or agreement was in the area of “*fellowship*” (sharing). What were the pillars of the church in Jerusalem in agreement or sharing with Paul and Barnabas? The subject matter of the entire context is the

truth verses a man introduced doctrine of circumcision and keeping the Mosaic Law. When two share Bible fellowship they share a mutual understanding of truth. They share the same purpose in this life; i.e., to receive eternal salvation through Jesus Christ. As an outward sign of this inward spiritual fellowship the parties shook hands.

Conclusion leads us to Fellowship:

Fellowship with brethren who held to the truths of Jesus Christ was outwardly expressed either through a handshake (Gal. 2:9) or a kiss (Rom. 16:16 etc.). The conclusion is obvious: when I shake my brother's hand today I am expressing the same outward sign of fellowship as if I were to kiss him or her with a holy kiss. Christians, in these United States, are more likely to shake each other's hand rather than give a kiss; i.e., it is a matter of propriety. There will be times when the Christian shakes hands with those that are not even members of the body of Christ. Again, this is a matter of propriety for our society. We shake hands with those we are greeting for purposes other than spiritual because we are being courteous. There is; however, a distinction to be made between the "holy kiss" and "right hand of fellowship" with common greetings to those of the world. God forbid that we should give a "holy kiss" or "the right hand of fellowship" to those who walk in error (cf. II Jn. 9-11).

John C. Robertson