The Holy Kiss
-- Apostolic Christian Church Practices Series --

Since the beginning of Christianity there have been many scriptures that appear somewhat vague and perhaps difficult to understand. Yet, while some appear as difficult there are many passages that are easy to read and understand. In these cases it only remains for the humble and obedient to transact these directives into their personal lives.

One scriptural passage that is easy to understand is that referring to the holy kiss. This practice is very simple to comprehend, and is plainly commanded in the New Testament.

Go back in time for a moment and picture in your mind what it must have been like in the early Christian churches such as in Rome, Jerusalem, Antioch, and a host of other typical Biblical cities. It is easy to reflect how those holy and devout men of God—such as Peter, Paul, Luke, Barnabas, Silas, and even Christ Himself—practiced the holy kiss. It's safe to conclude that those faithful brethren cherished this practice in those persecuted early assemblies.

Yet this cherished blessing of that day has not been confined to the early churches. Faithful brethren are exercising this holy commandment some 2,000 years later. For the greeting with a holy kiss can still, in the late twentieth century, be observed among the believers on any given Sunday in the Apostolic Christian Church. Yes, the same greeting with the holy kiss, as practiced by such saints as Peter and Paul, is still exercised in such divergent places as Lester, Iowa, Indianapolis, Indiana, Bay City, Michigan, Sarasota, Florida, Altadena, California, Gridley, Illinois, and in many, many other assemblies.

In view of the retention of this Biblical practice, the question often arises just why the church still adheres to this standard, because very few church denominations in the United States still greet their brethren with a holy kiss. The answer is straight from the Bible. The holy kiss is still implemented because the Bible commands it. While times change, the substance of the Bible does not.

The Word of God gives this commandment, not just once, but five different times. And this is not merely a directive incorporated in the Old Testament law (and thus made void through grace), but it is a clear and concise one intended for use in the New Testament church.

Perhaps at times men, through their inability to sometimes grasp seemingly complex scriptures, can attempt to justify their disobedience or unwillingness to comply with the letter or spirit of a particular Biblical directive. Any type of justification, however, is without foundation in the case of the holy kiss. Those in the New Testament church are advised to greet one another with a holy kiss on more than one occasion—and in language that even an elementary scholar can readily understand.

The first Christian churches were given this commandment in the instances listed below:

1. Romans 16:16 "Greet one another with an holy kiss".
2. [I Corinthians 16:20](https://www.biblegateway.com/passage/?v=1co&g=16&n=20) "Greet ye one another with an holy kiss".
3. [II Corinthians 12:12](https://www.biblegateway.com/passage/?v=2co&g=12&n=12) "Greet one another with an holy kiss".
4. [I Thessalonians 5:26](https://www.biblegateway.com/passage/?v=1th&g=5&n=26) "Greet all the brethren with an holy kiss".
5. [I Peter 5:14](https://www.biblegateway.com/passage/?v=1pe&g=5&n=14) "Greet one another with a kiss of charity".

These verses provide Biblical evidence that it is God's intent followers of Christ are to greet and salute one another with a holy kiss.

Other New Testament accounts of using a kiss stand out clearly. [Acts 20:37](https://www.biblegateway.com/passage/?v=acts&g=20&n=37) reads, "And they wept sore, and fell on Paul's neck and kissed him". In [Luke 7:45](https://www.biblegateway.com/passage/?v=luke&g=7&n=45), Christ addressed Simon upon entering this Pharisee's home saying, "Thou gavest me no kiss". Further, in the heartwarming parable of the prodigal son, when the wayward son returns home in [Luke 15:20](https://www.biblegateway.com/passage/?v=luke&g=15&n=20) it reads, "And he arose, and came to his father. But when he was yet a great way off, his father saw him, and had compassion, and ran, and fell on his neck and kissed him".

**USE OF THE HOLY KISS IN THE APOSTOLIC CHRISTIAN CHURCH**

The word "kiss" can be defined in many different ways particularly as it relates to its intended context. In a religious sense, however, "kissing is a universal expression in the social life of higher civilizations of the feelings of affection, love, and veneration".

In the mystical body of Christ brethren employ the holy kiss as an expression of love and veneration. It is done so, idealistically at least, to convey love, reverence, and esteem for fellow believers in the Lord.

In the Apostolic Christian Church the use of the holy kiss is, of course, confined to each particular sex. That is, men salute men, and women salute women. Salutation between the sexes is exercised by a handshake and verbal acknowledgement.

The practice of the kiss is considered as holy. While it is perhaps judged by some as unusual in the context of our contemporary society, it cannot or at least should not, be viewed by the skeptic as something which is unduly odd or weird. It is exactly the opposite. In fact, to see two men acknowledge each other prior to a worship service, exchange a firm and manly handshake, and swiftly exchange the holy kiss indeed is a paramount reflection of the love of Christ. Esteem and brotherly love among God's elect are manifested.

It would admittedly seem somewhat unusual, and a departure from conventional behaviour, if a mere kiss was exchanged much like the custom of years ago as practiced in Europe and oriental lands. Because in earlier times it was customary for most anyone to give a kiss of greeting. Yet, the holy kiss which is practiced in Apostolic Christian assemblies is not the kiss that has its origin in social custom, but is a holy kiss with its origin founded in the will of God, and is included among the commandments of the New Testament. Obviously, there is a vast difference between the holy kiss, and the kiss of custom or form.

In fact, one religious encyclopedia states, "Considerable use has been made of the kiss as a symbol of love and fellowship in the history of the Christian church. It was not the same as the
common kiss among friends in the Roman world, nor the common Jewish salutation among
friends, for it was a 'holy' kiss observed only among the members of the church".  

In his description of the worship service of the churches in the second century, Justin
Martyr stated, "Then let the men apart, and the women apart, salute each other with a kiss in the
Lord".  

Any objective outside observer of the holy kiss, viewing it as practiced in the Apostolic
Christian Church, can readily admit that it is done with the utmost discretion. It is practiced by
normal people under very orderly circumstances, and the reverence and esteem with which it is
done truly brings glory to God and reflects the group's humble intentions of obeying in full the
"whole counsel of God".

The holy kiss has been practiced since the beginning of the denomination. The founder of
the Evangelical Baptists in Switzerland (the group which ordained and sent the first elder to
found the group currently known as Apostolic Christian), S. H. Froehlich, in an extract from a
sermon given in Strassburg on November 1, 1846 said, "This holy kiss is known as a holy kiss,
that it may be set apart from that of common usage, as a holy thing, and also that it may not
degenerate into a lifeless form".  

Further, in a letter dated January 12, 1856 from Strassburg to one of his outlying
churches, Froehlich writes, "This spiritual union and holy fellowship (among believers) finds
expression in the brotherly kiss, if this kiss truly be the expression of brotherly love".  

Also, in the formation of the church in America, the holy kiss was practiced. By the late
nineteenth century many new church assemblies were holding meetings and the holy kiss
continued. As the denomination grew and more churches were organized, there was no
inclination to arbitrarily abandon the use of the holy kiss.

If current use of the kiss is viewed in the context of history, and especially in light of the
scriptural accounts of God's followers, it finds solid root. The Bible is legion with examples of
the kiss:

- Jacob kissed his father (Genesis 27:27)
- Esau kissed Jacob (Genesis 33:4)
- Laban kissed Joseph (Genesis 29:13)
- Joseph kissed his brethren (Genesis 45:15)
- Aaron kissed Moses (Exodus 4:27)
- Moses kissed Jethro (Exodus 18:7)
- David kissed Jonathan (1 Samuel 20:41)
- The father kissed the prodigal son (Luke 15:20)
- The elders at Ephesus kissed Paul (Acts 20:37)

Further in the Bible, a kiss portrays the feelings individuals have for one another. As
indicated above in Genesis 27:27, it indicates affection between parents and children. In Ruth 1:9
and 1 Kings 19:20 it is used by members of a family or near connection. In the Song of Solomon
The kiss is given as a token of love. Homage and submission are revealed through a kiss in Job 31:27 and 2:12.

HISTORICAL USE OF THE HOLY KISS

The early Christian church has long been noted and admired for the love and unity that prevailed in its assemblies. Plagued both by a lack of numbers and profound persecution, those brethren huddled together in love. Even though at times problems arose among them, which required special epistles from the Apostles, a firm bond of brotherly love nevertheless prevailed. Not only was his true in the church at the time the New Testament writings were made, but the rich depth and substance of the body of Christ continued on. It is little wonder, then, that the holy kiss was practiced, not only during the New Testament era, but in the centuries that followed - and that it is still continued in some places yet today.

Aside from the five Biblical verses commanding the use of the holy kiss, several writers aptly comment on its use. From The Dictionary of Christian Antiquities, "The kiss, the instinctive token of amity and affection from the earliest times, found a place in the life and worship of the Christian church. The symbol of peace and love could nowhere find a more appropriate home, in its highest and purest ideal, than in the religion of peace and love.

Another author says, "The holy kiss was exchanged by primitive Christians who felt they were members of a real family. The naive consciousness of belonging to the household of faith led them to adopt this practice of kissing one another. Paul's term for it is a holy kiss, distinguishing it as a sacred kiss from the oriental kiss of courtesy. This practice prevailed long in worship. Tertullian observes at the end of the second century that no prayer was complete apart from the kiss that followed in the congregation.

A partial description of a church service in the third and fourth centuries reads, "Let the deacon say to the people, 'let no one have any quarrel against another; let no one come in hypocrisy. Then, let the men give the men, and women the women, the Lord's kiss. But let no one do it with deceit as Judas betrayed the Lord with a kiss.'"

BREAKDOWN OF THE USE OF THE HOLY KISS

As the early church grew and spread across the continents a gradual breakdown of the use of the holy kiss occurred. It seems that generally the kiss was universally practiced in the churches up until the end of the fourth century. From that time on the practice slowly began to disappear.

From the fifth century to the Middle Ages the kiss was used in some form or another, but it was generally confined to liturgical and ritual ceremonies, and to some members of the clergy. Small groups of devout believers, however, clung to the practice.

The Encyclopedia of the Lutheran Church states, "Since the time of St. Augustine, it was only the communicants who exchanged the kiss, a custom prevailing until the 13th Century."
The New Schaff-Herzog Encyclopedia of Religious Knowledge says, "In Western Christendom the kiss of peace continued to be observed until the waning period of the Middle Ages, though it is open to question to what extent and in what particular forms".

The same reference relates that in both divisions of Christendom there was substituted in its place the practice of kissing the altar, the sacred elements, or the stole by the clergy, and the kissing of the hand by both the clergy and laity.

History has clearly recorded an important fact for us – that irregardless of method or pace a gradual disintegration of the holy kiss, long a treasured part of early Christian fellowship, took place.

**REVIVED USE OF THE HOLY KISS**

It was not until the beginning of the Anabaptist movement, which was an outgrowth of the Reformation occurring early in the sixteenth century that the revival, observance, and maintenance of the holy kiss was made on a large scale. This was particularly true in countries such as Switzerland, Germany, and Holland where observance of the holy kiss in the common fellowship of believers became nearly universal.

In a fellowship such as the Anabaptists, with an emphasis on a literal following of the commandments of Christ and the Apostles, with a stress on the infallibility, unity and authority of the Bible, and with a conscious attempt to re-establish the church on apostolic foundations, it is not surprising to find the spirit of love which characterized the early church, nor to find loves' most warm and Biblical expression, the holy kiss.

In addition to the Anabaptists other groups during the Reformation (and a few before) practiced the holy kiss. The use of the kiss was renewed by some of the medieval sects such as the Albigenses and Waldenses. H. J. Warner, in *The Albigensian Heresy*, gives an interesting account of a person who had left the Roman Catholic church and joined the Albigenses. Following the baptism and the laying on of hands he states, "All then place their hands on his head, and kiss him, and from that hour he is one of them.".

Henry Michel in *A Historical Sketch of the Apostolic Christian Church* makes reference to what is historically referred to as the "pilgrim church". This describes true believers in Christ all during the ages irrespective of location or official name, particularly during the days of the apostate church from the fifth to the sixteenth century. These pilgrim believers generally adhered to the principles that were taught and exemplified in the New Testament. While no records were kept of these souls (official religious records were only kept by the large universal church), it is logical to assume that they practiced the holy kiss.

Many interesting and heartwarming accounts are given on how persons who were persecuted for their faith and eventually became Christian martyrs were firm believers in practicing the holy kiss. In *Martyr's Mirror* an account is given of an incident that took place in 1546 in Styria, a province of Austria, among a group of Anabaptists. It reads:
They were led in iron chains through Styria and delivered into the bailey at Vienna, to the jailer who said, "Come, I will bring you to a vault where are others of your brethren". When they met, they embraced and kissed each other and praised the Lord.\textsuperscript{13}

In the same book, reference is made to a group of believers facing execution in 1528 at Bruck, on the Mur, Styria.

A circle having been formed, they all knelt down to pray. Then they arose and submitted to the sword. The youngest of them all entreated his brethren that they should let him suffer first. He then kissed them and said, God bless you my beloved brethren; today, we shall all be together in Paradise.\textsuperscript{14}

John Calvin, a leader of the Reformation during the sixteenth century commented on the holy kiss and said, "It was a sign of mutual love, and I have no doubt that Paul meant to encourage them to cultivate good will among themselves, not only in their hearts and in the duties which they were bound to perform, but also with that sign, so long as it was holy". In his commentary on I Peter 5:14, Calvin asserted; "Now he bids this to be the kiss of love, so that the sincerity of the heart might correspond with the external act."\textsuperscript{15}

THE KISS OF CUSTOM...AND THE HOLY KISS

Over the years various arguments have been advanced as justification for eliminating the holy kiss. One of the most common reasons given for the non-use of the holy kiss is that the brotherly kiss was only a social custom at the time of the Apostles, and largely for that reason it is assumed both Paul and Peter incorporated it into their writings. They say that salutation type kissing was an ingrained procedure of that current culture, having been influenced by earlier societies - Oriental, Jewish, and others. And that since our modern culture no longer practices salutation type kissing; the Biblical directives in this regard do not apply, at least not in a literal sense.

In fact, The Wycliffe Bible Commentary, in speaking about Romans 16:16, passes off the command of the holy kiss by saying, "Whatever in modern culture is symbolic of the deep affection Christians ought to feel toward each other - a kiss on the cheek, a warm handshake, a grasping of both hands - is the equivalent of the apostolic command".\textsuperscript{16}

While this explanation is made in sincerity, it is simply wrong. The Holy Bible does not list these substitutes, but explicitly commands the use of the holy kiss. To assert that a warm handshake may be substituted for the holy kiss is adding to the Word of God. Also, a firm handshake or other "symbols" would not stand out, because unbelievers do these things as well.

To imply that the holy kiss originated only from custom, and thus is no longer applicable today is to doubt the divine veracity of the Bible. We are told in the Word that "all scripture is given by inspiration of God" (II Timothy 3:16). We must have simple faith to believe this teaching.
It was God's will that both of the Apostles, Peter and Paul, command the use of the holy kiss, and on the basis of God's direction they taught and exhorted their followers to practice it. To think otherwise is to recognize these two Apostles, in this instance, not as inspired brethren in the Lord, but rather as keen sociologists, who were merely introducing the proper "customs" of that time into the household of faith.

It is difficult, indeed, to assume that if the holy kiss was intended only for use in the early church, that God would have included it in His divine and infallible Word. It is self-evident that God wants the holy kiss to be exercised until the Lord returns.

There are those today who oppose the holy kiss because they feel it is a barrier to drawing souls into the church. This practice in some circles is referred to as one of "Paul's limitations", that is, commandments which seem as grievous. They feel this is a clear deterrent in gaining converts. Yet, experience has taught that truly converted people - those who have fallen upon the Rock and been broken, who have repented of their sins and been converted, and are living sanctified lives - are not at all disinclined toward practicing the holy kiss, but rather count it as a privilege and an obligation in their pilgrim walk of life. It seems that the holy kiss can only be practiced, and survive, among those who are truly lambs of Jesus' flock. It is only then that grace is sufficient to exchange this kiss of love.

**SUMMARY AND CONCLUSION**

The holy kiss is a commandment of God and is recorded in the Holy Bible. It has been practiced for 150 years in the Apostolic Christian Church, and despite the fact that most churches no longer abide by this Biblical directive, it is still considered essential, and a wonderful blessing.

History indicates this commandment was carried out during the first few centuries since the Lord's birth, then fell into general disuse. It was resurrected on a large scale following the initial thrust of the Reformation. Sadly, though, the practice once again faded and aside from a few denominations using it today, it is virtually absent in church assemblies.

The Apostolic Christian Church, with a sharp eye on Scriptures, and on history, is intent on retaining this Biblical practice. The church realizes it has no authority to disregard a request from God. And, really, why should it acquiesce to contemporary society, and rob itself of such a God-given blessing?

Perhaps a dear, departed brother, John Baumgartner, summed it all up very well in his book, *The First Hundred Years, a history of the Bluff ton, Indiana congregation, when he described the use of the holy kiss in that church*:

"When the members came to this humble church they would greet each other with the holy kiss of love and Christian fellowship. Brothers would greet brothers, and sisters would greet sisters, and the brothers and sisters would greet with a handshake, all wishing each other the favors of the Lord. This was a commandment of the Apostles, and was also renewed by Brother Froehlich. This is still enjoyed and carried out one hundred years
later, and is advised by the elders of the church to be kept up till the Lord shall come again, and find us so doing."\textsuperscript{17}

This truly echoes the sentiments of the brethren of the Apostolic Christian Church.

\textbf{FOOTNOTES}

12. Michel, Henry; *A Historical Sketch of the Apostolic Christian Church*; No Publisher; page 6.
17. Baumgartner, John; *The First Hundred Years*; No Publisher, page 52.