

Kissing Christians

Paul closes his letter to the Thessalonians with this exhortation: “Greet all the brothers with a holy kiss” (5:26). The NRSV and other English versions render the Greek word *adelphoi* here as “brothers and sisters,” assuming that Paul did not mean to limit this greeting to males only. He closes three of his later letters with the more generic exhortation “Greet one another with a holy kiss” (Rom. 16:16; 1 Cor. 16:20; 2 Cor. 13:12).

In the early years of Christianity, followers of Jesus were noted for kissing each other (probably, though not necessarily, on the lips) and for making the exchange of such greetings a part of their public liturgy. Paul’s emphasis that this greeting was to be a “holy kiss” (cf. 1 Pet. 5:14) makes clear that nothing erotic was implied. Still, the practice was a novel one.

In the biblical world, kissing appears to have been commonplace between family members (Gen. 27:26–27; Exod. 18:7) and friends (1 Sam. 20:41). Men kissed men (2 Sam. 20:9) and women kissed women (Ruth 1:9, 14) as expressions of welcome (Gen. 29:13; Exod. 4:27), favor (2 Sam. 15:5), blessing (Gen. 48:9–10; 2 Sam. 19:39), farewell (Gen. 31:28, 55; 1 Kings 19:20), grief (Gen. 50:1), and reconciliation (Gen. 33:4; 45:15). However, there does not appear to have been any precedent in Jewish or Greco-Roman society for kissing between men and women who were not either relatives (Gen. 29:11–12) or lovers (Song 1:2; 8:1).

The New Testament contains references to kisses similar to what is found elsewhere in the Bible (Mark 14:45; Luke 15:20; Acts 20:37), but it also introduces this new concept of a “holy kiss” that might be shared by believers regardless of gender, rank, or race. This practice probably can be traced to the teaching of Jesus that identified his followers as family members (Mark 3:35). Based on this idea, a greeting shared between literal brothers and sisters became a symbolic act expressing the spiritual relationship between those who were one family in Christ.

In the second century, the ritual exchange of a “kiss of peace” became a standard component of the Sunday morning liturgy (see Justin Martyr, *First Apology* 66).

For more on this subject, see Michael Philip Penn, *Kissing Christians: Ritual and Community in the Late Ancient Church* (Philadelphia: University of Pennsylvania Press, 2005).