

THE UNITY OF THE CHURCH  
AND THE KISS AS ITS BIBLICAL EXPRESSION

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SUBMITTED TO  
THE AMERICAN JOURNAL OF BIBLICAL THEOLOGY

21 DECEMBER 2010

I remember the first time I ever *really* considered the concept of the unity of the Church. I have been a Christian since childhood; fluent and well-versed in the subtleties of that elusive tongue: Christianese. If someone had asked me when I was sixteen years old whether I “believed the Church was one body,” I am certain I would have answered in the affirmative. But if asked the same question at any time since the summer of 2003 (when I was nineteen, in case you are wondering), my answer, though unaltered, would carry with it much greater and deeper meaning.

During this special summer, my college choir was privileged to make a concert tour of Italy and Austria. Having grown up in a tiny town of 500 people in northwestern Montana, this was my first time travelling abroad. I remember the mysterious and wonderful aura of the medieval hill-town of Orvieto; its walls, once protected by the steep hillsides which surround them, now readily conquerable via cable-car. I remember the imposing columns and vaulted ceiling of its grand gothic cathedral, and I remember singing Peter Tschesnekov’s *Salvation is Created* during a morning mass in that cathedral. I remember feeling each sonority of that piece with more clarity than I ever had before, and I remember – oh, do I remember the exquisite silence that befell the grandeur of that ancient space when the last vestige of the final cadence had at long last faded away. I remember reciting the Lord’s Prayer in English while the rest of the congregation recited it with us in Italian, and I remember for the first time in my life, standing in *conscious* unity with Christ’s Church. Divided by ocean, border, language, and culture; united in Christ. I wish more Christians in America could experience that.

A few days later on the same concert tour, this time in Assisi, I was the fortunate (though understandably awkward) recipient of the greeting so customary in much of Europe – the kiss. My recent revelation about the unity of the Church had been powerful, but it was still settling in to my rough-and-tumble, western-bred psyche, and although I knew the kiss was a customary greeting, my western independence was wounded by the vulnerability that it caused. The co-assailants of my fortress of individuality were a sweet elderly couple from Germany who had attended our concert while on vacation.

I carried on as well as I could while trying not to say anything that would embarrass myself. I think I succeeded, but one can never be sure of the wisdom of anything one says or does as a teenager.

I share these anecdotal memories as an introduction to two related ideas. One of them I believe is germane and essential to a healthy ecclesiology. The other I think is negotiable but very practical. The first I expect will be met primarily with nods of affirmation from all but the most legalistic of my brothers and sisters; the second I expect to be met with nearly universal skepticism among Christians in America. I relate these memories in order to foster an identification of perspective with the reader, for I anticipate that at least some of my proposal will raise some proverbial hackles, and it may be well for the reader to know that this author's proposals have forced him to confront the obstacles of the ecclesiology and the culture with which he was raised.

My proposal is simple and two-fold: first, that the unity of the Church is real, accomplished by Christ regardless of the divisions that Christians invent to distinguish themselves from one another; second, that the kiss is a biblical, culturally reconcilable, and historically supported expression of that unity, and should therefore be appropriately used in the context of Christian fellowship.

### **The Unity of the Church**

I expect that the primary aspect of this proposal will be met with little disagreement. The biblical imperative of unity in the Church could hardly be clearer. The impassioned prayer of Jesus Christ recorded in John 17 ought to remove any doubt from the mind of any professing Christian as to the vitality of unity within the Church. God the Son passionately implores His Father: "Holy Father, keep through thine own name those whom thou hast given me, that they may be one, as we are."<sup>1</sup> And again: "the glory which thou gavest me I have given them; that they may be one, even as we are one..."<sup>2</sup> Lest there be any doubt as to the depth of the oneness to which Jesus is referring, here is how He describes the

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<sup>1</sup> John 17:11b.

<sup>2</sup> John 17:22.

oneness shared with His Father in the very same prayer: “as thou, Father, art in me, and I in thee.”<sup>3</sup> Furthermore, the text clearly indicates that the intention of this prayer is for all Christians, for all time, pled by the lips of none other than our Lord Himself: “neither pray I for these alone, but for them also which shall believe on me through their word...”<sup>4</sup> Fellow Christian, this prayer is for us.

Unity is also of fundamental concern to St. Paul. It is a particularly strong theme in his letter to the Ephesians,<sup>5</sup> in which he charges them to “keep the unity of the Spirit in the bond of peace.”<sup>6</sup> Should the modern Church rationalize that this exhortation was intended only for the Ephesian church of Paul’s day? To do so would require a blatant misreading of the text, for in the middle of the continuous passage contained between 3:14 and 4:16, Paul inserts a profound doxology:

*Now unto him that is able to do exceeding abundantly above all that we ask or think, according to the power that worketh in us, Unto him be glory in the church by Christ Jesus throughout all ages, world without end. Amen.*<sup>7</sup>

This universal hope and ascription of glory to God through Jesus Christ is meant to be “in the church.” The language of this passage is in every sense universal rather than local, and this great statement of praise is linked to the remainder of the passage by the logical connector “therefore.”<sup>8</sup> By Paul’s reasoning, it is because of the truth of what he has just written – a truth applicable to the universal church – that he is able to write what follows, and what follows is his charge to “keep the unity of the Spirit in the bond of peace.” Fellow Christian, this charge is ours to keep.

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<sup>3</sup> John 17:21.

<sup>4</sup> John 17:20.

<sup>5</sup> See Ephesians 3:14- 4:16 for primary emphasis.

<sup>6</sup> Ephesians 4:3.

<sup>7</sup> Ephesians 3:21.

<sup>8</sup> Ephesians 4:1.

David declares in the opening line of Psalm 133: “Behold, how good and pleasant it is for brethren to dwell together in unity!”<sup>9</sup> Jesus Christ our Lord prayed passionately for his Church to be one.<sup>10</sup> St. Paul’s exhortation to maintain “unity of the Spirit”<sup>11</sup> transcends time and place. If unity is so sweet to the man after God’s own heart,<sup>12</sup> so longed for by our Lord Himself, and so clearly commanded by the most prolific author of New Testament Scripture, we may surely dismiss any doubt as to the necessity of unity among those who profess Jesus Christ as Lord and Savior. Furthermore, if this is the unity for which Christ suffered and died then our confidence in its reality must necessarily be as strong as our faith in the gospel itself. Indeed, “there is one body, and one Spirit...one Lord, one faith, one baptism.”<sup>13</sup> “The Church is a fact established by God. It is his supernatural act.”<sup>14</sup> Our unity has been accomplished by Christ; it is not for us to achieve, only to maintain by belief and live by expression. Fellow Christian, with our Lord and with one another, we are one!

### **A Holy Kiss**

One can hardly navigate the New Testament without encountering St. Paul’s admonition to “greet” or “salute” fellow believers with a “holy kiss.”<sup>15</sup> (St. Peter’s preferred term is “kiss of charity.”)<sup>16</sup> Indeed, a truly poignant and personal example is given in Acts when the elders of the church at Ephesus

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<sup>9</sup> Psalm 133:1.

<sup>10</sup> John 17.

<sup>11</sup> Ephesians 4:3.

<sup>12</sup> See I Samuel 13:14 and Acts 13:22 for these descriptions of David.

<sup>13</sup> Ephesians 4:4-5.

<sup>14</sup> Robert G. Clouse, “The Doctrine of the Church,” in *The Portable Seminary* (Bloomington, Minnesota: Bethany House, 2006), 185.

<sup>15</sup> See Romans 16:16, I Corinthians 16:20, II Corinthians 13:12, and I Thessalonians 5:26 for examples.

<sup>16</sup> I Peter 5:14.

bid final farewell to Paul as he departs for Jerusalem. The utter propriety of their kisses in this context bears quotation:

*I have shewed you all things, how that so labouring ye ought to support the weak, and to remember the words of the Lord Jesus, how he said, It is more blessed to give than to receive. And when he had thus spoken, he kneeled down, and prayed with them all. And they all wept sore, and fell on Paul's neck, and kissed him, Sorrowing most of all for the words which he spake, that they should see his face no more. And they accompanied him unto the ship.<sup>17</sup>*

From this account, we may know at least that Paul does not endorse the blessing of a “holy kiss” without the benefit of personal experience. How then should Christians interpret this repeated admonition today? Is the “holy kiss” among Christians simply a cultural dodo – rightly extinct from our culture; or is it instead a cultural panda – rare, but beautiful and powerful when rightly encountered?

At the suggestion that the kiss is appropriate for use in the modern American church, I expect to encounter a fair degree of resistance. I believe that a major contribution to this resistance is a concern regarding what kind of kiss is being suggested. After all, our culture clearly distinguishes between the kisses of romantic love, familial affection, and deep friendship. These distinctions deserve attention, for they exist with demonstrably equal clarity in the cultures represented throughout the biblical accounts – cultures in which the “holy kiss” and the “kiss of charity” were most certainly appropriate.

The epistles of St. Paul were originally addressed to churches in various cities. These churches were comprised of people representing different first century Near Eastern cultures, specifically Jewish and Greek. The epistle to the Romans, for example, was written to a body of believers that was mostly Jewish.<sup>18</sup> Conversely, the epistles to the Corinthians and Thessalonians were written to churches

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<sup>17</sup> Acts 20:35-38. The entirety of this moving account is contained in 20:17-38.

<sup>18</sup> Adam Clarke, “Preface to the Epistle to the Romans,” in *Adam Clarke’s Commentary*, One Volume Edition, edited by Ralph Earle (Nelson Reference, 1967), 1034-36.

comprised mostly of Greek Christians.<sup>19</sup> We may surmise that St. Paul would not have commanded such a greeting as a kiss unless it was relatively common practice for those in intimate relationship with one another in the cultures he directly addressed. Indeed, his own experience as recorded in Acts bears this out.

A survey of the contexts in which the kiss is used in Scripture can provide a valuable perspective on its public perception in both the ancient Hebrew culture of the Old Testament and the Jewish culture of St. Paul's day that grew out of it. I believe a short summary of such a survey is in order here, for it will aptly demonstrate a considerable parallelism with modern American culture in terms of the perception and use of the kiss, and this in turn will speak to its propriety in the modern Church in America.

In the Old and New Testaments, by this author's count, there are six categories of kiss clearly recorded. Most prominent is the kiss between members of the same family.<sup>20</sup> Also prominent is the kiss between dear friends.<sup>21</sup> There are also kisses of religious and cultural significance,<sup>22</sup> as well as kisses of betrayal,<sup>23</sup> the most famous of which is Judas' thrice recorded kiss of Jesus. The kiss is also used metaphorically in poetry and proverb.<sup>24</sup> In addition, attention is paid to the kiss shared between lovers.<sup>25</sup>

If there is any doubt in the reader's mind as to the public perceptions of the kiss in the Old Testament, they may be put to rest by the discussion of one very helpful example. Although I encourage the reader to peruse all of the Scripture citations made in this essay, space permits only one example at

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<sup>19</sup> Adam Clarke, "Introduction to the First Epistle to the Corinthians" and "Preface to the First Epistle of Paul the Apostle to the Thessalonians," in *Adam Clarke's Commentary*, 1087-1090 and 1204-1207.

<sup>20</sup> See Genesis 27:15-41, 29:1-19, 31:19-35, 55, 33:1-10, 45:15, 48:10, 50:1, Exodus 4:27, 18:7, Ruth 1:9, 14, II Samuel 14:33, I Kings 19:20, and Luke 15:20 for examples.

<sup>21</sup> See I Samuel 20:41, II Samuel 19:24-39, and Acts 20:37 for examples.

<sup>22</sup> See I Samuel 10:1, II Samuel 15:5, I Kings 19:18, Job 31:27, Hosea 13:2, Luke 7:38, and 45 for examples.

<sup>23</sup> See II Samuel 15:5, 20:9, Matthew 26:48-49, Mark 14:44-45, and Luke 22:47-48 for examples.

<sup>24</sup> See Psalm 85:10, Proverbs 7:13, 24:26, and 27:6 for examples.

<sup>25</sup> See Proverbs 7:13, Song of Solomon 1:2, and 8:1 for examples.

this point. Song of Solomon is a book rich in imagery and passionate in expressed desire. Although the opinions of scholars regarding the principles of its interpretation run the gamut from literal to allegorical,<sup>26</sup> there is value for us simply in its expression of the cultural values concerning the kiss. The second line of the book expresses affinity with our own culture in confirming the kiss as a symbol of romantic love: “Let him kiss me with the kisses of his mouth: for thy love is better than wine.”<sup>27</sup> Furthermore, in the eighth chapter a clear cultural distinction is drawn between the propriety of kisses shared between siblings and those shared between lovers: “O that thou wert as my brother, that sucked the breasts of my mother! when I should find thee without, I would kiss thee; yea, I should not be despised.”<sup>28</sup> We may certainly observe from this desire that a public kiss in ancient Israel was perfectly acceptable between members of the same family, such as siblings. We may further conclude that the same public expression between lovers was deemed inappropriate, for it would cause the offenders to “be despised.”

From this short analysis, we may observe that (perhaps surprisingly) the sexual and familial connotations of the kiss in modern American culture were shared by the culture of ancient Israel. Furthermore, the admonitions of St. Paul to a “holy kiss” and of St. Peter to a “kiss of charity,” in addition to confirming the greeting’s acceptability in the first-century Greek and Jewish cultures, are also admonitions to a kiss of a particular class. Far from being a license to lewd or inappropriate behavior, Paul’s endorsement belongs only to a kiss given as greeting *in holiness*. There is no room for sexual immorality in the realm of holiness. This is in fact the opposite of what St. Paul commands. Holiness is a tall order, for it is nothing short of the nature of God himself: “But as he which hath called you is holy, so be ye holy in all manner of conversation; Because it is written, Be ye holy; for I am holy.”<sup>29</sup> It is notable

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<sup>26</sup> Adam Clarke, “Introduction to the Canticles, or Song of Solomon,” in *Adam Clarke’s Commentary*, 560-563.

<sup>27</sup> Song of Solomon 1:2.

<sup>28</sup> Song of Solomon 8:2.

<sup>29</sup> I Peter 1:15-16, cf. Leviticus 11:44, 19:2, and 20:7.



that the word translated “conversation” – *anastrophē* – can also be translated “behavior.”<sup>30</sup> Indeed, in the practice of the “holy kiss” called for by St. Paul, there is room for neither immoral speech nor conduct.

Likewise, St. Peter endorses not just any kiss, but one given *in charity* (*en agaphē*). “Charity” is often translated as “love,” yet it is a very specific kind of love. “Charity” is especially love of God and love of neighbor. As Easton confirms: “it is spoken of as the greatest of the three Christian graces,”<sup>31</sup> among which also are faith and hope. Easton does not speak too highly of charity, for Christ declares when asked which is the greatest commandment:

*...Thou shalt love the Lord thy God with all thy heart, and with all thy soul, and with all thy mind. This is the first and greatest commandment. And the second is like unto it, Thou shalt love thy neighbor as thyself.*<sup>32</sup>

Highest of the Christian graces indeed is charity – love of God and love of neighbor. It is precisely this which ought to mark the greeting endorsed by St. Peter.

With all respect for the moral concerns of my fellow Christians, (as well as with empathy, for I confess that I find my theology running aground of my inclination at this point), I must ask whether a biblical understanding of the kiss as greeting among fellow Christians allows any room for the lewdness or public perception of immorality, the fear of which I expect causes the most resistance to the idea. In answer, I must offer an objective, if uneasy, “no,” for the kiss they encourage is to be undertaken in holiness and charity rather than sensuality. Furthermore, I must suggest that the admonitions and examples of two great apostles are not at odds with present American cultural values concerning the kiss,

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<sup>30</sup> James Strong, *Strong's Exhaustive Concordance of the Bible, with Greek and Hebrew Dictionaries* (Royal Publishers, 1979), entry for “*anastrophē*,” entry 391.

<sup>31</sup> Matthew George Easton, *Easton's Bible Dictionary*, reprint of 1879 edition (Forgotten Books, 2007), entry for “charity,” cf. I Corinthians 12:31-13:13.

<sup>32</sup> Matthew 22:37-39, cf. Mark 12:30-31, and Luke 10:27.

for the values of the culture into which they wrote mirror our own on this matter. If this is the case, then I must suggest further that the kiss is appropriate as a greeting among Christians if exercised free of sensuality and motivated by holiness, love of God, and love of neighbor.

I expect that the most disconcerting thing for most American Christians about greeting their fellow Christians with a kiss is the fact that the kiss bears two fundamental connotations in our culture: sexual and familial. It would seem then, that the biggest barrier to introducing the kiss as greeting among Christians in America is the legitimate concern that the sexual connotation will be over-indulged by those participating or misunderstood and slandered by outside observers. However, as we have already discovered, these same two categories of kiss were present and are clearly distinguished in biblical history and culture, yet Paul and Peter both endorse the kiss as greeting among Christians. I contend that a proper understanding of Christian unity necessitates a true identification of believers as family. Familial identification culturally legitimizes certain kinds of kiss, and it is only these that I recommend be used in the Church.

My first “holy kiss,” contrary to what I perceived at the time of its reception, came not from a stranger an ocean and a language removed from my life, but from my sister. May I suggest that if we as Christians truly believe what we profess regarding the unity of the Church – its oneness in its members and in its Lord – then the familial expression of that unity would not only *be* appropriate, but *seem* appropriate? Dare I put it so crassly? Maybe we should get over ourselves.

What was it that bothered me about the blessed greeting of my spiritual sister from Germany? Did her expression of unity strike me as immoral? Absolutely not. There was not a hint of sensuality in it. No. It made me uncomfortable because it forced me to be vulnerable; it forced me to be family; it forced me to acknowledge our unity.

I have a few very dear and close friends with whom I have maintained contact since my college years. One, a fellow musician and fellow Christian, was particularly close during my Junior and Senior years of college. It is difficult to describe the level of love, the level of oneness that we shared. I once described it to him as if we had dived from opposite ends of a ship, sunk to the great depths of crushing

darkness, and upon ascending and breaking the surface, we were somehow side by side. I imagine that if any biblical example could parallel the depth of our friendship, it would be that of David and Jonathan.<sup>33</sup> Once, after a long evening of diving apart and resurfacing together, we shared a very intimate farewell: a hug, a word or two of mutual respect, and a kiss to the cheek. It was not planned; it was not awkward; it was not in the least measure sensual. I can only imagine that this is as close as I have ever found myself to the ideal of a “holy kiss” or “kiss of charity.” It was born of a special bond – beyond closeness; I might best call it unity.

Unity is admirably expressed in intimacy, and intimacy is impossible without vulnerability. The very thing that struck me about my German sister’s kiss of greeting was the *vulnerability* that it caused me to feel. Perhaps that is a good thing. Perhaps it is simply too easy to avoid intimate, familial relationship with fellow Christians when our greetings are at an arm’s length. How much bitterness is retained between spiritual siblings? How much forgiveness withheld because we are not forced in our weekly greetings to come face to face with one another and with the mutual sins that mar our relationships? I am perfectly able to swallow a grudge long enough to get by with a nod and a handshake. I’m not sure I could do the same and give a kiss of love to my brother. It simply requires too much vulnerability; it requires too high a degree of intimacy; it requires me to confront any sin in my heart and deal with it before greeting my brother in love. As I said: perhaps this vulnerability is a good thing. After all, we are one, and (as with our biological counterparts) we are family whether we want to be or not!

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<sup>33</sup> See I Samuel 18-23 for examples of this great friendship.

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