

## **TO KISS OR NOT TO KISS?**

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I shall never forget one church I visited as the guest preacher. After the service I stood at the door with the pastor. I shook hands with everybody, while the pastor kissed some ladies, but shook hands with other ladies, and needless to say, shook hands with all the men! It was a very strange experience.

The fact is that there are churches where people kiss, and churches where people do not kiss. There are, however, no churches where everybody – or at least, every woman – receives a kiss. Correction: if you are a woman and were to come to my church on Christmas Day, you would be offered a kiss. On Christmas Day I make it a point of kissing every woman as they leave church. Some of the older ladies love it – indeed, I am fairly certain that for one or two it might be the only kiss they receive that Christmas.

But Christmas apart, I don't kiss people – or at least, not at church. I'm more than happy to kiss people at a social do in their homes (the only problem then is to know whether it should be one peck or two), but not at church. For as minister I am called to be friends of all. Nothing would be worse than for me to show that I am more friends with one person than another. This, of course, is not to deny the reality that I am indeed more friends with some than with others – to my mind there is nothing wrong with having friends in the church. But such friends have to be private friends. When I am on church premises I am on duty, and there my duty is to be equally friendly to all. If anything, on a Sunday I try not to speak to those with whom I enjoy a particular friendship – that friendship is to be enjoyed elsewhere, and not at church.

So what about the New Testament injunction to 'greet one another with a holy kiss'? In the first place, the emphasis is probably more on the greeting than on the kissing. Furthermore, we are dealing with a different culture, in which kissing was more general – we are also probably dealing with smaller and more close-knit church communities than tends to be the case today. Much as I may like kissing (and I do!), I think that Paul was above concerned for his readers to express affection to one another, and to do so in an appropriate manner. Having seen some of the so-called 'holy' kissing that goes on in churches, I would suggest that 'in an appropriate manner' should possibly rule out kissing the opposite sex!

So what about hugs? Eugene Peterson in his paraphrase 'The Message', for instance, translates: "Holy embraces all round". But then there are embraces and embraces – and in charismatic circles hugs and hugs (followed by the appropriate patting on the back).. Goodness me, I seem to have entered a minefield.

The important thing is that we show affection – appropriately – to everyone! The moment we begin to make distinctions, that moment the affection is not appropriate, or at least not appropriate in church.

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