REFORMED THEOLOGICAL SEMINARY (CHARLOTTE)

TO KISS OR NOT TO KISS?:

UNDERSTANDING NEW TESTAMENT EPISTOLARY IMPERATIVES

SUBMITTED TO DR. ROBERT J. CARA

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BY

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I. Introduction

During my frequent business trips to the Middle East, the most stressful thought often came to mind is surprisingly not my sales target, but the different forms of kisses unique to Saudi Arabia, Dubai, Kuwait, Iran, and Oman. Perhaps this is why I am intrigued by the 4 kissing imperatives from Paul (Rom 16:16a; 1 Thess 5:26; 1 Cor 16:20b; 2 Cor 13:12a) only found in his letters written in the beginning of his ministry always at the closing of these epistles.[1] My paper is not geared towards speculating the reason behind Paul giving this imperative to these brethren in Rome, Thessalonica, and Corinth. I hope to unpack Paul's intention of such a command as well as to research on the form of kisses that Paul has in mind because these two objectives will be my segway to tackle a larger issue, i.e., the relevance of NT commands in our present times. With this aim in mind, I have organized my paper into three sections namely, Exegetical Analysis, Theologizing, and Conclusion.

II. Exegetical Analysis

Greek Text	Translation[2]
Ἀσπάσασθε ἀλλήλους ἐν φιλήματι ἁγίῳ. (Rom 16:16a; 1 Cor 16:20b)	Y'all must greet one another with a holy kiss.
ἀσπάσασθε τοὺς ἀδελφοὺς πάντας ἐν φιλήματι ἁγίῳ. (1 Thess 5:26)	Y'all must greet all brothers with a holy kiss.
ἀσπάσασθε ἀλλήλους ἐν ἁγίῳ φιλήματι. (2 Cor 13:12a)	Y'all must greet one another with a holy kiss.

[1] All of Paul's letters consist of the opening, the body, and the closing, giving rise to the study of interpretive significance of Paul's variation from the standard pattern within each section of his letter. See David Alan Black and David S. Dockery, *Interpreting the New Testament: Essays on Methods and Issues* (Nashville, TN: Broadman & Holman Publishers, 2001), 423–424.

[2] Apart from my own translations, all biblical quotations are taken from the ESV.

Before we dive into the exegetical analysis of these imperatives, it might be useful to provide some NT background pertaining to such a customary practice. Kissing is a common expression of respect and affection. Probably sharpest contrast of this act is found in the meal at a Pharisees' house whereby Jesus rebuked this host for not greeting him with a kiss (probably on his face) in contrast with the unknown contrite woman who kissed his feet and anointed them with expensive perfume (Luke 7:36-50). In Jesus' and the apostles' days, kisses are primarily for relatives, teachers, rulers, and those we love as an expression of love (Luke 15:20; Acts 20:37), respect (Luke 7:45) and honor (Luke 7:38, 45; 22:47).[3] With this understanding in mind, Judas' betrayal of his master via his kiss greeting seemed so ironical as it was a greeting of trouble instead one of peace (Matt 26:48-49; Mark 14:44-45; Luke 22:47-48). Such a practice is clearly extended to the apostles' times as this is the manner which the elders of Ephesus parted with Paul at Miletus in weeping, embraces and kisses knowing that they might not see the apostle again (Acts 20:36-38). Likewise, Peter gave the same command, in his first letter to the Christians in Pontus, Galatia, Cappadocia, Asia, and Bithynia, which is to "greet one another with the kiss of love" (1 Peter 5:14). With this backdrop in mind, I seek to examine exegetically this terse command frequently used by Paul with the intention to understand the role and the form of kissing in the life of the early church.

Let us begin with the first word ἀσπάζομαι in the imperative tense. This verb is a common Hellenistic word which may be used to welcome, to greet or to bid farewell to someone. In the NT, it occurs almost 60 times in which the majority is found in the Pauline epistles such as Rom 16:3-23 with 21 appearances used in the same abovementioned sense. Similarly, Jesus explicitly

[3] Even in the OT, it is common to find parents and grandparents kissing their children and grandchildren (e.g. Gen 31:28; 32:1) and vice versa (e.g. Gen 27:26 f.; 50:1), and among brothers, sisters and relatives (e.g. Gen 29:11; 33:4; 45:15; Ex. 4:27; 18:7. Kissing is the manner by which Christians express their intimate fellowship with one another in the NT period. See *BDB*, 1057.

commands his twelve disciples to extend such a greeting to their hosts (Matt 10:12-13) which is clearly a greeting of peace (Luke 10:5). In this sense, ἀσπάζομαι is tightly connected to the concept of peace which is the enjoyment of the restored relationship with God. Existentially, such a greeting of peace is probably quite lengthy in contrast to our casual hi and bye.[4] As one writer rightly summarizes, greetings are not good wishes but "a real communication of the peace of God."[5] Therefore, it is reasonable for us to see these greeting-commands at the closing of their letters, which are in line with the peace and grace opening introductions, emphasizing the assurance of the reconciled status and identity of their audience in Christ. This understanding of ἀσπάζομαι gives us the insight to see greetings differently with a theocentric purpose in mind. It then makes sense for Paul yearning such a greeting to be extended to every member, i.e., ἀλλήλους in the local churches.

Obviously, such a command to greet one another is not merely one of speech but one which involves physical contact. Paul clearly guides his listeners with this prepositional phrase, i.e., ἐν φιλήματι ἁγίῳ which is almost identical across these 4 verses except for 2 Cor 13:12a which has ἁγίῳ sandwiched between ἐν and φιλήματι. I suggest that this difference in word order has no significant exegetical value because the emphasis should be placed on the preposition ἐν highlighting that kissing is Paul's preferred instrument of greeting.[6] Apart from his cultural context, I argue that the more important reason behind kissing is to depict a close relational association among believers within the churches because of their new identity in Christ as fellow

[4] Silva further suggests that greetings during Jesus' and the apostolic age might be quite time-consuming given their high view of community in contrast with ours these days. This is probably why Jesus commands them not to greet anyone whilst on the road because of the urgency of their mission from the Lord (see Luke 10:4). See *NIDNTTE*, 1:425–27.

[5] Joachim Jeremias, *New Testament Theology: The Proclamation of Jesus* (London: Xpress Reprints, 1971), 133.

[6] Murray J. Harris, *The Second Epistle to the Corinthians: A Commentary on the Greek Text* (NIGTC; Grand Rapids, MI; Milton Keynes, UK: Wm. B. Eerdmans Pub. Co.; Paternoster Press, 2005), 936.

brothers and sisters regardless of race, gender, and social status. We may now briefly summarize that this imperative has a vertical and a horizontal aspect to it. ἀσπάζομαι points the believers upward to their restored relationship with God through Christ. The physical act of Christian kissing is the horizontal connection between the spiritual relatives of the family of God.

Do we know the manner in which the apostles and the early church believers kiss? The etymological stem of φίλημα is derived from the verb φιλέω which is broadly used "to regard and treat somebody as one of one's own people."[7] This goes well with the purpose of kissing in the preceding paragraph. It is also a sign and a pledge of reconciliation which might be the reason why Paul uses this command twice out of the four instances in his two letters to Corinth. Scholars have suggested many forms of kissing such as on the mouth, hands, cheeks, forehead, eyes, shoulders, and feet.[8] Such an interpersonal expression is also not uncommon in the Old Testament as kissing is an ancient manner of greeting and salutation (Gen 29:11, 13; 33:4; Exod 4:27; 18:7), parting (Gen 31:28; 32:1), and reconciliation (Gen 33:4; 45:15).[9] From these OT examples, kissing indeed has a strong familial connotation. Perhaps it is one of the main reasons why the apostles encourage this physical act among believers with an intent to forge unity in Christ.[10] On this premise, I think Witherington is right that such greetings from Paul is part of his strategy to reconcile the Jewish and Gentile believers in Rome which may also be applied to the badly divided church in Corinth.

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[7] In the Greco-Roman sphere, this word φιλέω is more common than ἀγαπάω whereby the former leans more towards "to like" and the latter pointing to strong feelings, devotion, and even passion, i.e., "to love." However, it is important to note that φιλέω and ἀγαπάω often functions as synonyms. See Gustav Stählin, "Φιλέω, Καταφιλέω, Φίλημα, Φίλος, Φίλη, Φιλία," *TDNT*, 116.

[8] Craig S. Keener, 'Kissing', *DNTB*, 628–629.

[9] "Φιλέω," 114–146. Some suggest that kissing might be a custom commonly practiced in Jewish synagogues of the first century AD between men and men, women and women. See W. Harold Mare, *New Testament Background Commentary: A New Dictionary of Words, Phrases and Situations in Bible Order* (Ross-shire, UK: Mentor, 2004), 271.

[10] Charles A. Wanamaker, *The Epistles to the Thessalonians: A Commentary on the Greek Text* (NIGTC; Grand Rapids, MI: Wm. B. Eerdmans, 1990), 208.

Witherington further suggests that there might be as many as two-thirds of the names mentioned by Paul are nicknames hinting that these people have slave origins. This means that kissing one another is significantly meaningful in demonstrating unity between the upper and lower echelon within the church.[11] It seems that we can be fairly certain about the role of kissing in the congregational life of the early church days even though the role of the kiss might be varied and ambivalent in the Old Testament and Greco-Roman society.[12] However, we are not exactly sure about the precise form of kissing. This is an important point which I aim to take it up again in the theologizing section.[13]

From a grammatical point of view, Paul modifies his salutation imperative with the act of kissing and further modifies this act with the adjective ἅγιος. So what does Paul mean by "an holy kiss" in his epistles? ἅγιος and its cognates are frequently deployed by Paul which is also the primary word used in LXX to translate קָדַשׁ and its cognates in the Hebrew Old Testament.[14] Therefore, it is almost second nature to think of Paul along the lines of the Hebraic meaning of holiness. Semantically, קָדַשׁ may refer to consecrate and set something apart, to be made clean by contact with sacred things, and to devote.[15] Broadly speaking, ἅγιος shares the same semantic range in the New Testament evolving around qualities such as holiness, purity, devotion and

[11] Ben Witherington III and Darlene Hyatt, *Paul's Letter to the Romans: A Socio-Rhetorical Commentary* (Grand Rapids, MI: Wm. B. Eerdmans Publishing Co., 2004), 9–11; James M. Freeman and Harold J. Chadwick, *Manners & Customs of the Bible* (North Brunswick, NJ: Bridge-Logos Publishers, 1998), 538. Craig S. Keener, *Romans* (New Covenant Commentary Series; Eugene, OR: Cascade Books, 2009), 188–189.

[12] William Klassen, "The Sacred Kiss in the New Testament: An Example of Social Boundary Lines," *NTS* 39 (1993): 122-35.

[13] Cara suggests that kissing is likely to take place both "within and between the genders" as well as might be on the cheek or forehead. See Robert J. Cara, *A Study Commentary on 1 and 2 Thessalonians* (Darlington, England: Evangelical Press, 2009), 164-165.

[14] Silva points out that the LXX uses ἅγιος very frequently (over 800 times) which is far more than other Greek literature. See *NIDNTTE*, 124.

[15] *BDB*, 872–873.

consecration, pure, and divine.[16] This adjective is often used in both LXX and NT to describe God and his people particularly pointing his people to right living.[17]

Silva raises two helpful observations, i.e., a continuity and a discontinuity, pertaining New Testament use of ἅγιος and its cognates. Firstly, he affirms that many NT passages retain the OT framework of holiness. On the other hand, he also highlights the discontinuity that the concept of holiness and sacredness in the NT "no longer belongs to things, places, or rites, but to the manifestations of life produced by the Spirit."[18] This is what theologians would term as progressive sanctification which is the organic growth of the elect by the grace of God so that we are enabled more and more to die unto sin, and live unto righteousness such as love for all the saints (Eph 1:15) and standing by them in need (Rom 12:13).[19]

But how does this idea of purity and right living apply to kissing? Scholars debate over this issue. Thiselton helpfully summarizes the three main views of the meaning of the holy kiss namely, (i) its solemnity, or (ii) its liturgical value, or (iii) its symbolic sign of affection and respect *between* fellow Christians.[20] Calvin is probably the most famous proponent to interpret such an holy kiss as a solemn one given to Paul's listeners who are saluting one another in the sacred assembly.[21] Among these three views, the liturgical role of kissing is most highly debated as some suggest that kissing is a liturgical part of worship during the apostolic time (of which I am not fully convinced).[22]

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[16] *L&N*, 744, 538.

[17] S. E. Porter, "Holiness, Sanctification," *DPL*, 398.

[18] *NIDNTTE*, 124-133.

[19] *WCF* XIII.1

[20] Anthony C. Thiselton, *The First Epistle to the Corinthians: A Commentary on the Greek Text* (NIGTC; Grand Rapids, MI: Wm. B. Eerdmans, 2000), 1344-1347.

[21] He further suggests that kissing was much more common and customary among the Jews as compared to the Greeks. See John Calvin and John Pringle, *Commentaries on the Epistles of Paul the Apostle to the Corinthians* (Bellingham, WA: Logos Bible Software, 2010), 78-80.

[22] Barrett suggests that this might be the reason why kissing has become a cultic act in Justin Martyr's days. See C. K. Barrett, *The Second Epistle to the Corinthians* (BNTC; London: Continuum, 1973), 343; C. E. B.

I prefer to adopt the third view as I am convinced by Harris' threefold rationale explaining how a kiss can be holy. Firstly, it is an expression of love *for* fellow Christians forgiven of their sins by God which propels them towards reconciliation and forgiveness. Secondly, it is a sign of genuine fellowship *among* the saints in Christ without deceit, discrimination, and division. Lastly, it is a physical contact made by οἱ ἅγιοι who are people sanctified by the Holy Spirit and adopted by God the Father into his family, which, I argue is a visible witness of the gospel.[23] Therefore, just as kisses are common among biological relatives, kisses are holy in the sense that they are "exchanged between spiritual relatives in the Christian community".[24] These three reasons go perfectly well with ἀσπάζομαι functioning as a reminder of our relationship with God and the act of kissing unites the body of Christ. Kissing also set the covenant community apart from the world as it is probably the only place in the entire Greco-Roman society that slaves and masters kiss one another. It is not merely a boundary marker but also an amazing testimony of the transformative work of the gospel through the Holy Spirit. Such an understanding of the holy kiss is definitely also in line with the presence of conflicts within these three congregations.[25] With this, I conclude

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Cranfield, *A Critical and Exegetical Commentary on the Epistle to the Romans (Volume 2)*, (ICC; London; New York: T&T, 2004), 796. Bruce goes further to argue that kissing might be a regular practice before the partaking of the elements during the early church in which Wanamaker thinks that it is quite plausible. See F. F. Bruce, *1 and 2 Thessalonians*, (WBC; Waco, TX: Word, 1982), 134; Wanamaker, *Thessalonians*, 208. Expanding Bruce's thoughts, Harrisville's argument is that Paul's letter was read during the worship and the invitation to kiss is followed by the anathema and maranatha in 1 Cor 16:22 which are suggestive of the Lord Supper liturgy during the early church which was then adopted by the later church subsequently restricted to same gender or to the clergy. See Roy A. Harrisville, *I Corinthians* (ACNT; Minneapolis, MN: Augsburg Publishing House, 1987), 292. Martin casts doubts on such the role of kissing in the early church. See D. Michael Martin, *1, 2 Thessalonians* (NAC; Nashville: Broadman & Holman Publishers, 1995), 191. I would highly recommend one to refer to Seifrid's well-thought argument against the eucharistic and cultic role of kissing during the apostles' age. See Mark A. Seifrid, *The Second Letter to the Corinthians* (PNTC; Grand Rapids, MI; Cambridge, U.K.; England: William B. Eerdmans Publishing Company; Apollos, 2014), 493–497. Fee also argues that the evidence is lacking to make the case that Paul is requiring the early church to greet one another with a kiss during a Eucharist. See Gordon D. Fee, *The First Epistle to the Corinthians* (NIGTC; Grand Rapids, MI: Eerdmans, 2014), 836.

[23] Cara suggests that it is "holy" because it is done between two saints. See Cara, *1 and 2 Thessalonians*, 164–165.

[24] Harris, *2 Corinthians*, 936.

[25] Jeffrey A. Weima, "Neglected Endings: The Significance of the Pauline Letter Closings," *JBL* 115 (1996): 114.

that this imperative is a regular call from Apostle Paul challenging believers to remind one another of their renewed relationship with the Lord so to love, forgive and be reconciled with one another.[26]

IV. Theologizing

What is the cash value of this imperative in our days? Should Christians kiss? There are probably two extremes of application. One might well become a kissing Baptist who deems kissing and the washing of the saints' feet as important as say the Decalogue.[27] On the other end of the spectrum, one might follow the revisionism fad in downplaying the imperatives of the Bible on the grounds of cultural disparity. Therefore, I like to present a framework in this section with the aim of helping one to deal with the NT imperatives.

The basic premise of this grid is to first help one to categorize the NT imperatives into 4 groups by identifying the clarity of the imperative in terms of our understanding of the NT practice as well as the presence of immediate reasons given by the NT authors in the pericope. This diagram categorizes commands into 4 sections namely, (1) those which are unclear in practice and without immediate reason, (2) those which are unclear in practice but with immediate reason, (3) those which are clear in practice without immediate reason, and (4) those which are clear in practice with immediate reason.

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[26] Roy E. Ciampa and Brian S. Rosner, *The First Letter to the Corinthians* (Grand Rapids, MI; Cambridge, U.K.: William B. Eerdmans Publishing Company, 2010), 862–863; Simon J. Kistemaker, *Exposition of the Second Epistle to the Corinthians* (Grand Rapids: Baker Book House, 1953–2001), 459.

[27] T. L. Miethe, "Scott, Walter (1796-1861)," in *Dictionary of Christianity in America*, ed. Daniel G. Reid (Downers Grove, IL: InterVarsity Press, 1990), 1060.

(2) Unclear in Practice with Immediate Reason(s)	(4) Clear in Practice with Immediate Reason(s)
(1) Unclear in Practice without Immediate Reason	(3) Clear in Practice without Immediate Reason

With these four categories presented in this framework, I would like to suggest that there are two general modes of application, i.e., "principlizing" and "actualizing" presented in the diagram below. One should aim to live out the principles presented in the two categories of imperatives on the left column of the table. As for those two categories on the right column, I would highly recommend Christians to abide by them faithfully without compromise.

<= PRINCIPLIZING =>	**<== ACTUALIZING ==>**
Unclear in Practice with Immediate Reason(s)	Clear in Practice with Immediate Reason(s)
Unclear in Practice without Immediate Reason	Clear in Practice without Immediate Reason

Allow me to stress-test all the 4 categories of this grid starting with the kissing imperative. Because of my conclusion earlier on this paper pertaining to the uncertainty over the precise form of kissing in the first century, the command of kissing would belong to the bottom left box. Because of this opaqueness in practice, the modern audience is bound to carry out the underlying principles in their own context.[28] For myself, to express love, reconciliation, and

[28] Though I differ with Grudem's view that NT commands like kissing and lifting up hands in prayers (1 Tim 2:8) are symbolic in nature, we share the same conclusion, i.e., the underlying intent of such imperatives is definitely binding on Christians in the modern age. See Wayne Grudem, "Should We Move Beyond the New Testament to a Better Ethic?," *JETS* 47 (2004): 341-46.

fellowship whilst pastoring a church in Singapore primarily made up of Chinese, kissing might not be the most appropriate manner as compared to a sincere handshake or even an arm over a fellow brother and sister in private prayers for each other.

In the top left section, it pertains to imperatives which are fortified by immediate reasons but we modern Christians are not exactly sure pertaining the details of the NT custom. I suggest that Paul's mention of the head covering in 1 Cor 11:2-16 would qualify under this category. It is unclear to us whether Paul is referring to a hat, a small piece of symbolic cloth, a large hood covering all the hair, or hair itself. Because of the uncertainty of these two categories on the left side of the grid, this framework proposes one to apply the principles of such instructions instead of brushing them away as culturally irrelevant.

How about those directives that are clear as crystal? I would suggest to categorize them into those with immediate reasons and those without. The role of women in public worship (1 Tim 2:9-15) and the qualifications for overseers (1 Tim 3:1-7) are examples for these two categories respectively. Because of the high level of exegetical certainty over the imperatives, this framework hence suggests that the church, as well as modern believers, should aim at them in full. This is what I meant by "actualizing" in the framework.

The second usefulness of this grid is to help one appreciate better the concept of the scale of importance among NT imperatives. Using the same framework, I have further presented it in 3 different shades for the four sections namely, white, gray, and black. These colors represent low, medium, high level of importance respectively.

Unclear in Practice with Immediate Reason(s)	**Clear in Practice with Immediate Reason**
Unclear in Practice without Immediate Reason	Clear in Practice without Immediate Reason

Kissing is categorized earlier under those imperatives which are unclear in practice and also without immediate reason. Using this colored-grid, I like to suggest that it also falls under the category of lower importance. Existentially, this means that if one leaves the church in haste after a worship service without shaking or greeting a brother or sister, there is no need to trigger an emergency for the elders to drag this person back from the parking lot. But it would be still important for a Christian to see the importance of a handshake or a hug extended to his fellow brother and sister given the vertical, horizontal and external meanings presented earlier on in this paper.

As for issues like practicing the underlying principles of say head covering (primarily submission and order during public worship) as well as the qualifications of elders, these are matters of higher importance as compared to the kissing command primarily because of the biblical reasons provided and the clarity of the commands respectively.

Lastly, it is of utmost theological importance presented by the NT for Christians to ensure that imperatives belonging to the section that shaded in black such as the submission of women to their own husbands be obediently and faithfully executed in the church. With these two different uses in mind through the framework, I hope that it would be helpful to someone in the

sense of firstly categorizing the imperative using the dual conditions, namely clarity and immediate biblical support, so as to ascertain whether the particular imperative should be applied in principle, or literally, as well as to understand the importance of the commands.

V. Conclusion

So should we kiss or not to kiss? Grammatically speaking, these 4 Pauline imperatives are straightforward. Exegetically, it poses some challenges as I argue in this paper that the modern audience is uncertain about the precise form of kissing in which Paul is promoting. However, this should not swing one to the revisionists' camp, i.e., abrogating NT imperatives on the premise of culture irrelevance. I humbly propose a framework helping myself and perhaps a few more to categorize NT imperatives into those 4 sections in order to aid us with the comprehension of the theological weight behind each imperative as well as its practical aspect.

Leveraging on this framework, I conclude that the theological weight of this greeting imperative is lighter as compared to the rest of the imperatives highlighted earlier on. Nevertheless, such an imperative is still binding in our days whereby we are given the Christian liberty to exercise the principle wisely within the appropriateness of each person's cultural context extending familial love for one another springing out from a loving dedication to Christ.[29] The key purposes of physical gestures in the form of kissing, hugging, and shaking hands are (1) to be reminded of our renewed status in Christ, i.e., the vertical aspect, (2) the unity of the body of Christ, i.e., the horizontal aspect, and (3) the witnessing value to the gospel, i.e., the external aspect.[30] It is crucial for us to remember these as we often seek to execute the form

[29] Cara, *1 and 2 Thessalonians*, 167.

[30] William Hendriksen, *Exposition of Paul's Epistle to the Romans* (Grand Rapids: Baker Book House, 1953–2001), 510.

whilst overlooking the essence, which is also Clement's caution - love may be expressed in the form of a kiss "proven by a kindly feeling."[31]

[31] Clement of Alexandria, "The Instructor," *ANF*, 2291.