

UPWARD CALL

Brethren, I do not regard myself as having laid hold of it yet; but this is my one aim: to forget everything that's behind, and to strain every nerve to go after what lies ahead. I press on toward the finish line, where the prize waiting for me is the upward call of God

IN KING JESUS.

(Philippians 3:13-14)

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Holy Kiss; How About a Hug?

Greet one another with a holy kiss. (Romans 16:16)

On the evening news, there was a segment about men not becoming school teachers, so women dominate the profession. The point was that there are very few male role models in our public schools today. But my attention was arrested when they interviewed this young man who loves his job; he loves teaching young children. He said he would like to hug the children or put his hand on their shoulders to encourage them, but he knew that he could not for fear that someone would mistake his action for harassment or worse. In our day, there is this great fear of sexual predators, but perhaps this fear has gone so far that we are dehumanizing ourselves. There are days when we all need a hug or a hand on the shoulder to show that someone cares for us. It is part of being human. Otherwise, we become robots.

While pondering this matter, almost as if on cue, an article appeared in a newspaper that was entitled: *Banning Hugs — Schools Go for Zero Tolerance on Touching* by Leonard Pitts, *Richmond Times-Dispatch*, Richmond, VA, October 6, 2007. According to the article, schools from one end of our country to the other are banning hugs. They have reasons for it, such as it creates congestion in the halls, but is there something more onerous behind such action. It is as if, as a society, we are becoming so fearful of all sorts of *potential* offenses that we are moving to ban anything and everything that could be misconstrued to be an offense. The writer of the article asked the rhetorical question: *Am I the only one who sees businesses, schools, and public institutions moving, inexorably as a Terminator, toward the standardization and regulation of even the most mundane of human interaction?* He is not the only one, but only the Lord knows how many see it this way.

I think of my aunt, who was born in French Morocco, who hugs and kisses us on each cheek as a sign of affectionate greeting. Can you imagine how this would be received in our public schools? And yet, I can think of countries around the world who greet in this fashion. It is part of the fiber of certain cultures. However, not all countries appreciate public displays of affection or greeting.

I recall some years ago when I visited the country of a good friend and brother in the Lord (whose name and country will remain anonymous). As one who has spent more of his life in the south of the U.S. than in the north where he was born, I have grown fond of southern hospitality. I enjoy greeting people, even saying "hi" to people I pass by in public. Well, as I was walking along the street in my friend's home town, I wanted to greet people, but I noticed that no one ever made eye contact with me. I made a comment to my friend about my observation, and he told me that if I tried to greet people, they would think I was strange. It was not part of their culture to do so. Of course, this does not mean that they do not love one another; it's just that certain public displays of affection (called *PDA's* by some) are not their norm. However, it was a challenge for me not to greet people.

On another personal level, my dad was not a hugger or a kisser. He was a hand-shaker. When I entered college and went home during breaks, my dad would greet me with a handshake, until one year when I went home, I grabbed him and hugged him. Ever since that day, he hugged me.

But the experience that is forever etched in my heart is what occurred some time ago. My dad's health was deteriorating, and his mind was fading so that he did not know my name. Since my parents lived about 900 miles away and my mother needed help, I traveled to their home frequently to help out. On one of my visits, I had to leave early in the morning to catch a plane home. Dad was still in bed, and my mother woke him to let him know that I was leaving. Without any prompting, he held his arms out to me, so I crawled up on the bed; he put his arms around me and kissed me on the cheek. Never in my life had he ever done this to me. I cry when I think of how good the Lord is to give me such a personal and warm memory of love from my dad, even though his mind was receding into silence. Less than two years later, he was gone; and now he awaits the resurrection.

I recall one night that I was lying awake in bed, and I felt something embrace me as I lay there. It wasn't my wife either, although we do hug. Then, I heard the voice of the Lord. ***I am hugging you.*** Is this too fanciful? I don't think so! I think the Lord was expressing His humanity and His divinity to me. You see, I believe that our human touch with one another should not be based on culture. Our God is a comforter, and He knows that we need His touch of love and a knowing that we are His children in His care. After all, *God is love*, and He so loves the world.

Consider a young child who becomes distraught and begins to cry uncontrollably. How does a parent console the child? The good parent often hugs the child and smothers him/her with kisses to make it "all better."

Is there a Biblical example of greeting with a kiss? Absolutely!

Greet one another with a holy kiss. (2 Corinthians 13:12)

According to one source, a *kiss* is "a natural symbol of affection and reverence, of very ancient date. Early Christians conformed to the custom, and kissed each other during or at the close of public worship. According to some this was generally given by men apart and women apart, before receiving the Lord's supper, to testify peace and brotherly affection" (*Diaglott, Alphabetical Appendix*).

Paul, the apostle who died daily for the ecclesia (church), sent greetings to brethren and asked that it be a holy kiss. Perhaps it is time for those who belong to Christ to greet one another in this way. On second thought, if my friend from the anonymous country kissed me on the cheek, I would most likely have a heart attack on the spot. Even in the U.S., a greeting of this sort is not the public norm and might be too difficult for some of us, but is a hug too difficult? I think not! Let the hugs continue! Think about this: Have you ever been with a group of Christians who are being built together? One sign of their being built up in love (Ephesians 4:15-16) is that they are always hugging.

As the Lord's people, let us not lose our humanity. Hugs and kisses are a sign of our humanity and our love for one another. After all, we are commanded to love one another.

Let us be willing to display our love for one another in a world that is increasingly becoming dehumanized and in which love is growing cold because lawlessness is increased (Matthew 24:12). If we do, perhaps, the day will come when the world will ask us the reason for our love for one another. But let us not forget that expressing our love for one another is more than PDA's; it is about helping one another in the very practical ways of life.

Greet all the brethren with a holy kiss. (1 Thessalonians 5:26)