

Religious Symbols

Every religion or ideology has a visual symbol that best represents its core meaning. The Lotus flower for the Buddhists depicts the beauty that emerges out of chaos. The Jews, a hexagram which represents “The Star of David.” Chinese philosophers use the “Yin and Yang” to depict opposite but interconnected forces. A Marxist Hammer and Sickle are crossed to signify the solidarity of worker/peasant and factory/field. For 1000s of years the Swastika represented the continual movement of the sun from east to west. However, in the 1930s, it was adopted by Adolph Hitler to become the symbol of the Aryan race.

Definitive Symbol of Christianity

Symbols serve as powerful images that galvanize people around an idea, movement, or cause. What then should be the best symbol for Christianity? A manger, representing Jesus’ birth? A dove, symbolizing the Holy Spirit? What about an empty tomb for his resurrection, or a rock, as he is the cornerstone of the Church? What about a towel, representing Jesus’ servanthood? A throne or crown? He was/is a king after all.

As we begin our ramp up to Holy Week we focus on the most powerful, most enduring, and most cherished, symbol of Christianity. We start in Galatians 6:14, where Paul states

**May I never boast of anything except the cross of our Lord Jesus Christ,
by which the world has been crucified to me, and I to the world.**

For the past 2000 years the Cross has become the most widely known and illustrative symbol of the Christianity. Biblical thinker John Stott tells us why:

The Christian symbol became a simple cross. Its two bars were already a cosmic symbol from remote antiquity of the axis between heaven and earth. But its choice by Christians had a more specific explanation. They wished to commemorate as central to their understanding of Jesus...his death and his crucifixion.

Prince of Preachers Charles Spurgeon adds:

The highest glory of our holy faith is the Cross. The history of grace began earlier and goes on later, but in the middle point stands the cross.

The Contempt of the Cross

At first glance, Paul bragging about the Cross is bewildering. In the ancient world, it was the defacto symbol of terror and torture, the epitome of “man’s inhumanity to man.” For the Jews, crosses were even more horrid. “Cursed by God is anyone who hangs on a tree” Deuteronomy 21:23 tells us. So, when the Jewish religious establishment wanted to rid the world of Jesus they didn’t want to just end his life. No, that would hardly suffice.

They wished to humiliate him in the most embarrassing and gruesome way possible AND they wanted God’s approval for it. If Jesus truly was guilty of blasphemy, his punishment according to OT Law would be a quick stoning. A couple rocks to the skull, however, would be far too light of a punishment

for such a rabble-rousing, pseudo-prophet, and incessant blasphemer. The Jews were forbidden to carry out capital punishment on their own, therefore they needed to manipulate the Romans to do it. And when it came to crucifixion, no one did it better. Through years of experimentation, they mastered this grim and grisly feat. They became experts at extracting as much pain as possible for as long as possible.

A Most Horrible Way to Go

Crucifixion was a devastating way to go. The procedure damaged no vital organs, thus there was no excessive or internal bleeding to hasten death. Crucified people died slowly and agonizingly they begged for death's visit. Asphyxiation was the primary cause of death as the intercostal muscles used for breathing were slowly exhausted. So horrifying was crucifixion Rome rarely used it on its own citizens reserving it only for insurrectionists and malcontents.

Furthermore, crucifixion was sheer humiliation. The cross bearer was stripped naked and fastened to a beam which was placed in well-traveled areas. The condemned endured savage ridicule by anyone passing by. Under Roman law the crucified was denied burial. The corpse was left rotting on the crossbeam to be picked apart by scavenging birds, animals, and eventually maggots. This horrid sight served as an empire wide PSA: disobey Rome and this is your penalty.

Given the ghastly nature of crucifixion why would Paul, "brag in nothing but the cross." We will flesh out his many reasons from now until Good Friday but let's focus on the one he gave in our text.

Why Brag About the Cross?

The reason Paul brags on the Cross has a lot to do with a group called the Judiazers, i.e., followers of the Jewish religion. Members of this group infiltrated the church and were converting young Jewish Christians back to the OT law as a way of saving themselves. They were quick to boast about these conversions and to shove Paul's nose in it. But Paul said he brags only about the Cross because it is the pinnacle of God's redemptive achievement in the world. No less than 5x in his letters Paul states that Christ "died for our sins." Thus, the irreplaceable, irrevocable, and inextricable ground of our salvation is the Cross, not good works or law keeping. Thus, he relies on nothing else to be saved because nothing else can save. He explained in 1 Corinthians 2:8

**None of the rulers of this age understood this (God's work in the Cross),
for if they had, they would not have crucified the Lord of glory.**

If the devil, the Jewish religious establishment, or the Roman government, would have known that God would redeem and save the world through the Cross they would have never tortured and murdered Jesus. Therefore, all bragging/pride/ego, of trying to save ourselves, folds quicker than an overcaffeinated origami artist.

No Bragging About Anything Else

Incredibly, Paul will not even brag about what God has accomplished through him. And that was a lot. He wrote 13 NT letters. He planted dozens of churches and pert near converted the entire Roman

Empire single handedly. The Cross, however, is his only cause to brag because everything he has, and has done, is only possible because of it. In other words, we owe everything to the Cross: our very existence, salvation, and eternity. This fact prompted John Piper to write:

Only boast in the cross of Jesus. God's will is that the cross always be magnified—that Christ crucified always be our boast—that Christ gets glory and honor for every good thing in our lives and every bad thing that God turns for good.

Imagine: At Oscars “We Owe It all to the Cross”

Conclusion: Self-Crucifixion?

Because of what the Cross is, what it represents, and what it has done, Paul says he is “crucified to the world.” Previously in Galatians 2:20 he said, “I have been crucified with Christ.” Any one up for some self-crucifixion? Being crucified to the world, along with Christ, means that we are dead to self and dead to the world in terms of what it promises, desires, values, and prioritizes. In other words, because we have been saved exclusively by the Cross, we no longer need the approval, accolades, or achievements of the world. It simply has nothing to offer to us.

As we close today I have a pastoral request and a personal question.

- 1) The **pastoral request** goes to Christ followers: Since we owe it all to the Cross let us start making it our only brag.
- 2) The **personal question** is, “Does anyone here need to be saved by the Cross of Jesus?”