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The Importance of Christian Symbols - Especially the Cross

By Tal Davis

We are surrounded by symbols. Numbers, flags, money, business logos, barcodes, maps, mascots, and animals (eagles, lions) can all be symbols for something. Even the letters and words on this page are symbols that our minds immediately recognize as having specific meanings. Symbols are meant to represent something else – an idea, a nation, an organization, a thing, a place, a special day, or a religion (egs.: a crescent moon symbolizes Islam and the Star of David symbolizes Judaism).

A symbol only means what its creator or observer takes it to mean. For instance, the swastika was a symbol used in Asian religions like Hinduism, Buddhism, and Jainism for centuries. However, in the 20th century that old symbol was absconded by the German Nazi Party as its symbol to be displayed on all flags and national buildings. Today, because of its identification with the horrors of Nazism, it is forbidden in many countries to even display a swastika in public.

Christians have symbols also. For example, we have the Christian flag, which we used to pledge allegiance to at Vacation Bible Schools (though I think it is rarely done so anymore). The Christian Flag was reportedly first designed on September 26, 1897, at Brighton Chapel in Brooklyn, New York. "Its background is white, representing purity. In the upper corner is a blue square, the color of the waters of baptism, emblematic of heaven, the home of the Christian; also a symbol of faith and trust. In the center of the blue is the cross, the ensign and chosen symbol of Christianity: the cross is red, typical of Christ's blood."

The pledge to the Christian flag is often recited like this: "I pledge allegiance to the Christian Flag, and to the Savior for whose Kingdom it stands; one brotherhood, uniting all Christians, in service, and in love."

The Bible itself is a symbol for our faith and for God. Even many people who never bother to read it respect it as signifying divine truth and honor. It used to be that when a person swore an oath to tell the truth in court they would place their hand on a Bible to symbolize the oath before God. In past times it was understood that to lie under a divinely sworn oath would put your soul in danger of condemnation. Most civil

courts today no longer require swearing on a Bible or before God, only requiring "to swear or affirm to tell the truth."

The anchor is another Christian symbol. It symbolizes that Jesus is the anchor of our soul and holds us steady in the swirling waters of life. A ship without an anchor is doomed to be cast about by the waves and currents around it with no direction known. The book of Hebrews connects hope with the symbol of an anchor of the soul as Jesus enters into the heavenly Holy of Holies as our High Priest forever. "*So that by two unchangeable things in which it is impossible for God to lie, we who have taken refuge would have strong encouragement to hold firmly to the hope set before us. This hope we have as an anchor of the soul, a hope both sure and reliable and one which enters within the veil, where Jesus has entered as a forerunner for us, having become a high priest forever according to the order of Melchizedek.*" (Hebrews 6:18-20 NASB)

The fish is another ancient symbol used by early Christians to identify themselves to other believers. The story goes that during times of persecution when two people met, one would draw a half moon in the sand and, if the other drew another intersecting it to make a fish, they would know they were fellow believers. The fish symbol was derived from the Greek letters *Iota, Chi, Theta, Upsilon, Sigma* (ΙΧΘΥΣ/ΙΧΘΥΣ), spelling fish, which formed an acrostic for Jesus Christ Son of God Savior.

Another significant Christian symbol is the dove. Often if you visit churches, you will see a dove pictured somewhere on a wall or in a stained glass window. The dove symbolizes the Holy Spirit because we are told that when Jesus was baptized the Holy Spirit descended upon Him like a dove. (Matt. 3:16; Mark 1:10; Luke 3:22; John 1:32) A flame is also a symbol for the Holy Spirit because of when He descended like tongues of fire on the church at Pentecost. (Acts 2:1-4)

Unfortunately there is one Christian symbol that has been totally hijacked by those who use it for ungodly purposes. I refer to the rainbow. For centuries the beautiful multicolored rainbow spectrum symbolized God's promise to Noah and the world to never again flood the earth.

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"I establish My covenant with you; and all flesh shall never again be eliminated by the waters of a flood, nor shall there again be a flood to destroy the earth." God said, "This is the sign of the covenant which I am making between Me and you and every living creature that is with you, for all future generations; I have set My rainbow in the cloud, and it shall serve as a sign of a covenant between Me and the earth. It shall come about, when I make a cloud appear over the earth, that the rainbow will be seen in the cloud, and I will remember My covenant, which is between Me and you and every living creature of all flesh; and never again shall the water become a flood to destroy all flesh. When the rainbow is in the cloud, then I will look at it, to remember the everlasting covenant between God and every living creature of all flesh that is on the earth." And God said to Noah, "This is the sign of the covenant which I have established between Me and all flesh that is on the earth." (Genesis 9:11-17 NASB)

Sadly, over the last few decades the rainbow has become the universal symbol for the LGBTQ movement. Rainbow flags are now flown at Gay Pride Parades and streets are painted in rainbow colors to celebrate LGBTQ events. And, during a couple of administrations, rainbow colors were used to light up the Presidential White House. Even Major League baseball players are forced to wear rainbow colored caps on "Pride Days" (but they are penalized if they put Bible verses on them).

Of course there are two other very important Christian symbols that Jesus Himself initiated for us to practice. The first of these is the ordinance of the Lord's Supper – often called communion. On the Thursday before His death, Jesus had a meal with His disciples in the Upper Room. There He broke bread and drank wine saying, *"Take and eat it; this is my body." Then he took a cup, and after giving thanks, he gave it to them and said, "Drink from it, all of you. For this is my blood of the covenant, which is poured out for many for the forgiveness of sins."* (Matt. 26:26-28 CSB; see also Mark 14:22-23; Luke 22:19-20; 1 Cor. 11:23-26)

It is important to note that as evangelical Christians, we understand the Lord's Supper only to be a symbol for remembrance. Roman Catholics regard it as the Sacrament of the Eucharist. They believe the elements (bread dipped in wine) literally becomes the body and blood of Christ by a miraculous process called transubstantia-

tion. It is also called the Mass and is performed by a priest whenever possible for communicants in fellowship with the church. Evangelical churches do not agree with the sacramental concept of the Eucharist. We regard the elements of the Lord's Supper only as symbols of the body and blood of Jesus. Jesus said, *"Do this in remembrance of me."* (Luke 22:19; Matthew 26:26-28) John 6:35 indicates the Lord's supper was intended to be understood symbolically, not literally.

The other highly significant symbol for Christians is baptism. In these columns we have written much about baptism. But what exactly does the word "baptize" mean? The English word is a transliteration of the Greek term *baptizo*, which is defined several ways: (1) to dip repeatedly, to immerse, to submerge; (2) to cleanse by dipping or submerging, to wash, to make clean with water, to wash oneself, bathe; and (3) to overwhelm.

So why do the translators of the English Bible not translate the word *baptizo* directly to "immerse" or "dip" instead of transliterating it as "baptism?" The reason is probably that baptism became the accepted term by the Catholic and other churches that baptized infants so that people would not question the practice of sprinkling rather than immersing. That was long before the Bible was translated into English. So if the early English Bibles had not used it they would have caused major turmoil in the established churches in the middle ages and later in the Church of England when the first English Bibles were translated. So the term "baptism" and "baptize" stuck right down to this day.

In any case, Baptism is a symbol of a believer's identification with the death, burial, and resurrection of Jesus Christ, and is a permanent symbol of new life. In previous articles we addressed the question of whether or not baptism is necessary for salvation, so we will not cover that issue again here (Read it at: <http://www.marketfaith.org/2017/07/is-baptism-necessary-for-salvation/>). We will emphasize again, however, baptism is not a necessity for salvation. Salvation is entirely by grace through faith in Jesus Christ alone (Eph. 2:8,9). Nevertheless, it is an important act of obedience and discipleship for a believer. Every Christian should be baptized (and we would say by immersion) in accord with the example and command of Jesus (Matt. 3:13-17; 28:19; Mark 1:9-11; Luke 3:21-22). Numerous other Scriptures also direct believers to follow Him in this rite

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(Rom. 6:4; 1 Cor. 12:13; Gal. 3:27; Eph. 4:5; Col. 2:12).

Finally, perhaps the most important symbol Christians have used down through the ages is, of course, the cross of the Lord Jesus Christ. We see crosses almost everywhere we look. Churches put them on steeples and signs. People wear them as jewelry around their necks and on bracelets. We see them on bumper stickers and hanging from rear view mirrors. Bikers often have them tattooed on the arms and chests. For many of these folks, a cross is sort a good luck charm.

Roman Catholics usually prefer to use a crucifix. A crucifix is a cross with a depiction of Jesus physically hanging in crucifixion. That may be because Catholics, in their mass and liturgy, emphasize the death of Jesus. Protestants and Evangelicals prefer the empty cross which signifies the risen Jesus from the dead.

In any case, we need to understand that the cross is much more than just a good luck charm, or even a mere symbol! It represents the central event in God's plan for salvation. If there was no cross of Christ, there would be no salvation for mankind.

In his letter to the Romans Paul gives us the basic reasons why the cross is crucial to our salvation.

6 For while we were still helpless, at the right time Christ died for the ungodly. 7 For one will hardly die for a righteous person; though perhaps for the good person someone would even dare to die. 8 But God demonstrates His own love toward us, in that while we were still sinners, Christ died for us. 9 Much more then, having now been justified by His blood, we shall be saved from the wrath of God through Him. 10 For if while we were enemies we were reconciled to God through the death of His Son, much more, having been reconciled, we shall be saved by His

life. 11 And not only this, but we also celebrate in God through our Lord Jesus Christ, through whom we have now received the reconciliation. (Romans 5:6-11 NASB)

First Paul indicates that we were helplessly lost in our sins. However, he says "at the right time Christ died for the ungodly." That means that He gave His life on the cross as an atonement or sacrifice for our sins. His death paid the penalty we owed but could not pay. Sometimes people ask, "Just what is sin? Is it bad things we do, like drunkenness, sexual immorality, cursing?" (Everyone has his own list). Those are sins that are symptoms of sin. Sin is in our hearts. It is our nature to rebel against God, which leaves us hopelessly and helplessly lost. That's what sin does to humanity. That's why we have feelings of emptiness, frustration, lack of purpose, and hopelessness.

But this is where the cross enters. Notice Paul says God has provided a way in verse 8, "But God demonstrates His own love toward us, in that while we were still sinners, Christ died for us". God showed His love for us by sending Jesus to die for us on the cross. Because we were sinners Christ died for us. He took our place. This

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is why the the cross is not just a symbol! It is the only way by which we or anyone is saved. On the cross Christ made a sacrifice for our sin.

In verses 9-11 Paul gives the most important effects of the cross. He says we are "*Justified by His blood,*" "*saved from wrath,*" and "*reconciled to God.*" What is the result? We are made whole, our sin is forgiven, we have purpose for our lives, and we can enjoy a personal relationship with God both now and forever. All this is made possible by the cross of Jesus. It is more than just another symbol!

There are many other Christian symbols. Perhaps in future articles we will look at some of them. They include the Alpha and Omega, the *Chi Rho* (X over R), the Good Shepherd, the Shamrock, the Lily, and the Triad Diagram of the Trinity. Symbols are important in that they express ideas in ways that transcend mere words. So look for these Christian symbols and remember their meanings – especially the cross!