

Why We Have No Crucifixes 8-4-13

(Note: grammatically speaking, a “cross” is the sign which we identify that is the “plus” sign configuration. A “crucifix” is that sign with an image of Jesus on it. Because the Bible speaks about the “cross” as the event of the death of Jesus as well as the power of that death, this lesson uses the word “crucifix” exclusively to describe both the physical symbol without Jesus’ image and with Jesus’ image – BH)

If you were visiting this congregation today for the first time, one striking difference that immediately visible between our place of worship and any other is the absence of the symbol of the cross, or “crucifix”. This is no accident; we have intentionally not placed it up. This lesson will explain why

Different churches uses crucifixes for different reasons. In Catholicism, the crucifix is used as an aid of prayer (the rosary), for personal spiritual protection, and for building adornment/sanctification. In Protestantism, the crucifix is used as personal and congregational identification as well as memorialization. In addition to such uses, we see today the increase in the crucifix as personal adornments like “Christian Jewelry” and “Christian Clothing”.

This raises some questions about crucifixes. *Are they accurate? Are they authorized? Are they sinful?* We know that anything can be a symbol. An item, an action or a time reserved for honoring can be a symbol. Is the crucifix an accurate symbol of itself? The Greek word translated “cross” is *stauros*, which means *pole* or *stake*. It does not describe the image we see in a crucifix, nor does it exclude it. When describing the death of Christ, we read Acts 5:30 (*The God of our fathers raised up Jesus whom you murdered by hanging on a tree.*) and I Peter 2:24 (*who Himself bore our sins in His own body on the tree*). In both instances, the speaker simply calls the cross a tree.

Two conclusions we need to make: first, there is nothing in the Bible that tells us what the cross looked like, so we cannot say for certain that it was a crucifix. Second, the NT writers did not see a great value in making a specific description of that item. In fact, the crucifix symbol was not used by any Christians for many centuries after the death of Jesus¹

For Christians, we actually do have three authorized symbols of the cross. The Gospel is a symbol of the Cross (*For Christ did not send me to baptize, but to preach the gospel, not with wisdom of words, lest the cross of Christ should be made of no effect. For the message of the cross is foolishness to those who are perishing, but to us who are being saved it is the power of God. 1 Corinthians 1:17-18*), Baptism is a symbol of the Cross (*Or do you not know that as many of us as were baptized into Christ Jesus were baptized into His death?For if we have been united together in the likeness of His death, certainly we also shall be in the likeness of His resurrection, knowing this, that our old man was crucified with Him... Romans 6:3,5-6a*), and communion is a symbol of the Cross (*For as often as you eat this bread and drink this cup, you proclaim the Lord’s death till He comes. 1 Corinthians 11:26*). These approved symbols are found in this place of worship. There is no other symbol authorized

We know from the Old Testament that false symbols can be sinful. (*“You shall not make for yourself a carved image—any likeness of anything that is in heaven above, or that is in the earth beneath, or that is in the water under the earth; you shall not bow down to them nor serve them. For I, the LORD your God, am a jealous God....” Exodus 20:4-5*)

¹ Dilasser, Maurice. *The Symbols of the Church* (1999). Collegeville, MN: Liturgical Press, hardcover

One of the problems with crucifixes is that they make a false declaration. The crucifix identifies Jesus as dead, but the Bible proclaims "I am He who lives, and was dead, and behold, I am alive forevermore. Amen" (Revelation 1:18). Another problem with crucifixes is their worldliness. For one thing, it sets a physical sign of faith. Jesus spoke harshly against such in Matthew 23:25-28. As well, for many, the crucifix has become a mere decoration (Hebrews 10:29). Finally, there is the obvious problem of idolatry. Too often, it has simply become an idol. We are told to flee from idolatry (I Corinthians 10:14).

Hopefully, now we see that in fact we do find symbols of the cross in this place of worship. They are not crucifixes, but the authorized things we are meant to represent Jesus' death with.