

- differences in that some of the English verses constitute two verses in Hebrew.
- v. 11 they shall remain in the river only. The text stresses this point in verse 9 and again in verse 11; the frogs are out of place, but they can be returned to the place where they belong (in the river) if Pharaoh behaves in the appropriate way. Israel too are out of place (in Egypt), and Pharaoh must do the right thing by sending them on their way to a place where they do belong, the place that God has marked out for them.

- v. 14 the land stank. So do dead fish from the first plague in 7:18,21.
- v. 18 they could not. The magicians attempt to keep up with God by copying this miracle, but they are unable to do so with their enchantments. God plays along with them so far, and then moves up a gear. We sometimes behave like the magicians, thinking we can keep up with God, or match Him or beat Him in some way, and sometimes He may let us deceive ourselves for a time. But in the end that is all we shall be doing—deceiving ourselves.



## Principles, Preaching and Problems

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# The symbol of the cross

Trevor Maher

*“For the preaching of the cross is to them that perish foolishness; but unto us which are saved it is the power of God . . . For the Jews require a sign, and the Greeks seek after wisdom: but we preach Christ crucified, unto the Jews a stumblingblock, and unto the Greeks foolishness; but unto them which are called, both Jews and Greeks, Christ the power of God, and the wisdom of God” (1 Cor. 1:18,22-24).*

This article considers the use of the symbol of the cross in Christendom and elsewhere, and examines whether it is appropriate for those who accept the true Bible teaching of salvation through Christ to use it.

**T**HE GIANT cross stands over 280 feet high, and is constructed from what looks like metal scaffolding. During the last week in August 2002, Macedonian Orthodox believers gathered around it for a sanctification ceremony. Built on the top of Mount Vodno, just above Skopje, the capital of Macedonia, it is meant to symbolise 2,000 years of Christianity.

This monument is just one more case of the use of this symbol around the world, the most well known perhaps being the statue representing Christ with arms outstretched to form the shape of the cross high on a mountain above Rio de Janeiro. The symbol of the cross can be found in virtually all churches that claim to be Christian. It is incorporated in the design of priests' garments, used in the decoration of buildings

and as jewellery, illustrated in Bibles, hymn books, prayer books and in literature, and in various shapes and sizes it is paraded at many forms of services. It has become a religious icon recognised around the world, but it is one that Christadelphians have consistently refused to use. Is this the right attitude?

### What are the benefits?

The arguments advanced in our community for using the symbol are that it

- identifies us as Christians
- encourages us to think about the suffering of Christ
- reminds us of the love and mercy of God in providing a way for forgiveness of sins.

By using it, it is argued, we will be able to worship and serve God more sincerely, and our behaviour in our daily discipleship will be improved.

But what brings about this desire to use the symbol of the cross? The simple answer is that individuals probably look at what religious bodies around them are doing and think there is

benefit in copying. If the symbol of the cross was not used by other religious bodies, would some in our community be expressing a desire for it, or asking why we do not use it? Is such an attitude acceptable to God? And what principles, if any, does Scripture lay before us on the subject?

### Separateness in religion

When we look at the Old Testament we see that God explicitly instructed Israel, after they had been taken out of Egypt, not to copy the ways of the Egyptians, nor to look to the nations that inhabited Canaan whence they were going and follow their ways (Lev. 18:3). Such instructions obviously covered political and secular activities as well as religious, but, when Moses is instructing them in the commands of God in his final days, he refers directly to religious matters when he says: “inquire not after their gods, saying, How did these nations serve their gods? even so will I do likewise. Thou shalt not do so unto the LORD thy God” (Deut. 12:30,31) Earlier in this chapter Moses makes it quite clear that all vestiges of the religious practices of the nations in Canaan were to be removed (vv. 2,3).

The Apostle Peter says that the household of faith, like the children of Israel, are a holy nation, a people for God’s own possession, a holy priesthood to offer up spiritual sacrifices acceptable to God (1 Pet. 2:5,9; cf. Ex. 19:5,6). We must therefore abide by the same principles as Israel did. Paul, writing to the ecclesias at both Corinth and Colosse, emphasises the separateness of believers from religious attitudes and activities in the world around them, both pagan and Jewish (2 Cor. 6:14-18; Col. 2:6-17). No doubt some of these things would have seemed harmless or even beneficial, but they were not for the believers. Nowhere in the New Testament is the believer commanded or encouraged to use the symbol of the cross to adorn walls, garments and buildings, or to produce it as jewellery, in the way it is used today.

In Israel the people were encouraged to put the Scriptures on their doorposts and at their gates, and to have them as a sign on their hands and heads, that they might be in their hearts (Deut. 6:6-9). This concept is picked up in Jeremiah’s reference to the new covenant (31:31-34), cited in Hebrews 10:16-18, where God speaks of His law being in hearts and minds so that sins can be forgiven. This is what we seek to attain to; the Word of God identifying us, bringing to our



Fig. 1. Pagan priests with garments ornamented with the cross

minds the sufferings of Christ and reminding us of God’s love and mercy in calling us out of ignorance and falsehood, the darkness of the world.

When we know the origins of the symbol of the cross and its past and current uses, then we will readily appreciate that it has no part to play in the believer’s life. Indeed, it could actually lead one astray, and cause worship and service to be unacceptable to God. Some may consider this extreme, but Scripture shows us that when God’s people introduced alien concepts into their worship He rejected it.

### The origins of the cross symbol

It is not possible to give a comprehensive account of the origins of the cross symbol in one article, but a summary of the salient points follows.

Firstly, it must be stated that the symbol of the cross is not of Christian origin. The sign of the cross was part of the mystic pagan activities of the Chaldeans and Egyptians, related to the initial of the name Tammuz, the sun god. Tertullian says that those initiated into the mysteries were marked in baptism on the forehead with this symbol,<sup>1</sup> and the archaeologist Layard records that it was a sacred symbol in Nineveh identified with the sun.<sup>2</sup> It was embroidered on the garments of the pagan priests (Fig. 1 above), carried as an item by kings, and was known as “the sign of life”. Bacchus, the mythical Babylo-

1. *De Praescript*, chap. 40, vol. 2, p. 54.

2. *Nineveh and Babylon*, p 211; *Nineveh and its Remains*, vol. 2, p. 446.



Fig. 2. Bacchus depicted with a headband covered in crosses

nian Messiah, is represented with a headband covered with crosses (Fig. 2 above).

There is hardly a part of the world where this pagan symbol has not been found, having been in existence centuries before Christ lived and died (Fig. 3 below). Mexicans erected large stone crosses to the 'god of rain' ages before missionaries arrived to convert them; Druids had trees in their groves with all the branches removed and the largest two then fixed to the trunk to form a cross, with the bark also inscribed in several places with the symbol. It is believed that vestal virgins of pagan Rome at the time of Paul wore the symbol on necklaces (even as nuns do today). There are many writings that attest to the fact that the symbol of the cross as we know it today originated in pagan worship and practice and not with the early church, being adopted as the true doctrines became corrupted.<sup>3</sup>

### Christianity and the cross

The earliest record of the use of the symbol in Christianity appears in the church in Egypt, and then in Africa, starting about the middle of the

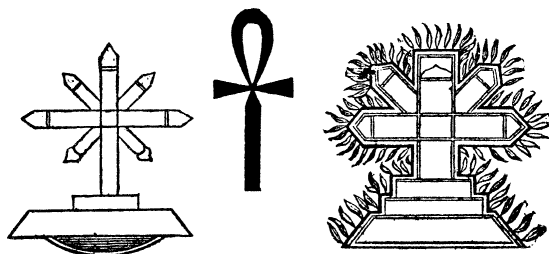


Fig. 3. The Egyptian Tau symbol (centre) flanked by two examples of the cross used in Buddhism

third century. Commentators writing about the "hieroglyphical character, the Tau", point out that numerous inscriptions were headed by this symbol on preserved Christian monuments, the same as appeared on the pagan gods in Egypt such as Osiris. Its use was the result of an attachment to old and cherished pagan symbols.

Church history has preserved the myth of the miraculous appearance of the cross to Constantine prior to his decisive victory in A.D. 324 over Licinius, when the forces of paganism in political and religious affairs were overthrown. It is said that the afternoon prior to the battle a cross appeared in the sky, very bright almost as though on fire, brighter than the sun, bearing the inscription, "Conquer by this". Christ is then supposed to have appeared to Constantine that night with this symbol and instructed him to use it as his ensign. Legend has it that it was this symbol of the cross that ensured his victory over paganism, and therefore it was enshrined in the life and activities of the church and its members.

However, the alternative account recorded by Lactantius, a scholar and tutor of those days, gives a different view. He states that Constantine claimed to have had a dream which led him to make the celestial sign of God upon his soldiers' shields. This sign was in fact the letter 'X', which is the initial of the name of Christ, being equivalent in Greek to 'CH'. It was the name of Christ, not the cross of Christ, that Constantine took into battle, according to this account. There is probably an element of truth in this, because in the Roman catacombs it was this symbol 'X' representing the name of Christ that the early Christians used. The same symbol is found carved in the pavement at Ephesus.

The reality of the situation is probably that Constantine needed the support of Christians in his struggle for power in the years A.D. 312-324, and adopting the symbol was part of his strategy. Many Christians waived their principles of separation, and joined his army and fought under the banner of the cross. When the time came to unify his empire, the way forward was helped by having this symbol, which those who fought to maintain paganism could accept and those who were members of the Christian church (which was now the state religion) were also happy with. The corrupt church also took on

3. *Kitto's Biblical Cyclopaedia*, vol. 1 p. 495; *Mythology*, Crabb, p. 163; *The Two Babylons*, Alexander Hislop.

many of the previously pagan festivals and incorporated them into its religious festivals, and they are still practised today.

By A.D. 431, following the Council of Ephesus, the true doctrines had been buried under false teachings. The apostasy first revealed at the time of the tower of Babel held sway again, and the use of the symbol of the cross was part of it. The symbol of the cross has been, and is, used to ward off evil and to bless, and is an object of worship itself—witness the way priests kiss it. The sign of the cross given by a priest with his hand is a declaration of the church's belief in a Trinity, the three points representing God the Father, God the Son and God the Holy Ghost. It is a relic of a pagan past now supporting a corrupt church.

### **Today**

When Christ speaks of his followers taking up their cross he is talking about putting him before our earthly family, rejecting natural desires, turning away from materialism, counting the cost and staying the course (Mt. 10:38,39; 16:24; Mk. 10:21; Lk. 14:27). When the New Testament speaks of the cross of Christ, it is referring to Christ himself, and the overcoming of sin in his life and the offering of his life as the sacrifice to cover our sins.

The symbols we are given are bread and wine, the one to represent his life and the other to represent his death. These symbols are put before us week by week, and by partaking of them we identify ourselves to God as those whom He has called. We meditate on the sufferings of Christ, both in life and death, and give thanks to God for His love and mercy in the redemption He has wrought through him. Some suggest that seeing the symbol of the cross when they go about their daily routines helps them think of the death of Christ and what he has done for them, but does not the same hold true when one sees bread and wine in daily life?

Those who use the symbol of the cross around us believe in a triune God, the immortality of the soul, the supernatural devil, and the church on earth as the Kingdom of God; they refuse to accept the inspiration of Scripture, they accept the theory of evolution, and are prepared to go to war. Why would a believer want to be associated or identified with such a group of people by using the symbol of their religious beliefs? Using it suggests that we do not understand the implications of our calling or the need to exam-

ine everything we do in service to, and worship of, God.

A failure to see our lives in the total time scale of God's purpose, from Eden to the Kingdom, will lead to a lack of discernment and an inability to reject the religious practices and principles of the people around us. The symbol of the cross existed in Egypt and in Canaan thousands of years before Christ, and if it was wrong then for God's people to adopt it then such must be the position today. The passing of time makes no difference, "one day is with the Lord as a thousand years, and a thousand years as one day" (2 Pet. 3:8), and we must think like that too.

Do we think that the judgements of God on false religious beliefs, practices and icons of our day, no matter how sincerely held, will be any different from those in the time of Moses, Elijah or Jeremiah? New Testament writings make it quite clear that they will be just as severe (Lk. 13:23-28; 2 Thess. 1:7-9; Rev. 18:20). A symbol used in ancient pagan practices does not become acceptable to God four thousand years later just because it has been adopted by a pseudo-Christian world which in reality denies the truth and power of His purpose.

When talking to the woman of Samaria Jesus said to her concerning her worship: "Ye worship ye know not what: we know what we worship: for salvation is of the Jews. But the hour cometh, and now is, when the true worshippers shall worship the Father in spirit and in truth: for the Father seeketh such to worship Him. God is a Spirit: and they that worship Him must worship Him in spirit and in truth" (Jno. 4:22-24). This discourse took place at Jacob's well, near Shechem, where Joseph was buried (vv. 5,6; Josh. 24:32). It was the place where Joshua instructed the children of Israel to put away the false gods from Babylon and Egypt (and all their imagery) and worship the true God in sincerity and truth (v. 14,25).

As the return of Christ draws ever closer, we should not draw closer to the world around us, but show in our practices and principles that we are drawing closer to the God of Abraham, Isaac and Jacob, "with Whom is no variableness, neither shadow of turning" (Jas. 1:17), and to His Son our Saviour.

*Illustrations taken from Alexander Hislop's Two Babylons.*