

LIVING WATERS NEWSLETTER

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CHERISH THE OLD RUGGED CROSS?

The cross, as we know it today, has become the symbol of Christianity. The Roman Catholic Church has attached great mystical significance to the cross that has resulted in the crucifix becoming a physical token of the presence of God. People have come to feel that by wearing a crucifix or regularly making the sign of the cross, God will be with them. While Protestants debunk the idea of a crucifix they have nevertheless made an image of the cross something sacred and have simply taken the figure of Christ off the crucifix and the empty cross has taken its place. Many Christians have a great emotional attachment to this symbol. It is worn as a necklace around the neck, worn as ear rings and graced the steeples of church buildings and the tops of the communion trays. Our hymn books are filled with songs about the cross and the death of Christ and few about the significance of the living Christ. Upon examining a popular Hymnal used in many churches today there was found 44 songs about His birth, 56 about His death, only 19 about his resurrection and none on the ascension.

This, however, has not always been the case. *The New Catholic Encyclopedia* stated: "The representation of Christ's redemptive death on Golgotha does not occur in the symbolic art of the first centuries. The early Christians, influenced by the Old Testament prohibition of graven images, were reluctant to depict even the instrument of the Lord's Passion." During the middle ages, and later the Waldenses, a sect originating in southern France in the 12th Century, considered the cross not as an item to be worshipped, but one to be despised. In his book *The Cross of Christ* John R.W. Stott writes of "the forthright objections of the Puritans" in the sixteenth century who thought of the cross as a piece of "Popery which the church of God in the Apostles' time never knew, and ought not be used for human inventions and not be added to divine institutions, There was always the danger of superstitious misuse. As King Hezekiah destroyed the brazen serpent, so the symbol of the cross should be abandoned."

We may not think of the cross as an emblem of worship but the religious world has laid so much emphasis on the cross we have neglected the importance of the resurrection in salvation and have ignored the ascension as having anything to do with our spiritual life. We have also clung so tightly to the cross as the instrument of the shedding of Christ's blood we have failed to understand the significance of his blood beyond His dying for our sins. The fact that his blood was shed must be taken further than Golgotha. The book of Hebrews tells us Christ "entered once for all into the Holy Place, not taking the blood of goats and calves but taking His own blood, thus securing an eternal redemption" (Heb. 9:12). The writer continues: "Since therefore, brethren, we have confidence to enter the holy place by the blood of Jesus, by the new and living way which He inaugurated for us through the veil, that is His flesh and since we have a High Priest over the house of God, let us draw near with a sincere heart in full assurance of faith..." (Heb. 10:20-22). The example of this is when the High Priest went into the Holy Place on the day of

atonement and offered blood of animals on behalf of the nation (Lev. 16:1-28). Christ entered "the holy place not made with hands, but into heaven itself now to appear in the presence of God for us" (Heb. 9:24). Therefore the cross would have meant nothing without the resurrection and ascension.

In Acts 2 when Peter preached on the day of Pentecost he speaks of the death of Christ in one verse (verse 23) and speaks of the resurrection and ascension in thirteen verses (verses 24-26). When the risen Christ appeared to Mary Magdalene He told her, "Stop clinging to Me, for I have not yet ascended to My Father, but go and tell my brethren, 'I ascend to My Father and your Father, and My God and your God'" (John 20:17). One of the great tragedies of the church has been a failure to realize the significance of the ascension and getting beyond the cross. We are still "clinging" to Christ and will not allow Him to ascend. We want to keep Him at best on the cross, shedding His blood and not presenting it to the Father on our behalf in the Holy Place not made with hands. This is in no way said to belittle, denigrate or minimize the cross. We are simply saying we should get beyond so much emphasis on the cross and give attention to things the cross made real for us besides the cleansing of our sin. The writer of Hebrews urges his readers to leave "the elementary teaching about Christ and press on to maturity." The things he mentions are repentance, faith, baptisms, laying on of hands, resurrection and eternal judgment (Hebrews 6:1-3). Not that these teachings were not important, but he wanted them to get beyond them to other things.

Now at the risk of causing spiritual shock, let's look closer at the Scriptural teaching about the cross. There are only two words in the Greek language translated "cross": *STAUROS* and *XYLON*. Although these two words are translated "cross" no Greek dictionary or lexicon shows them to mean "cross". The word *stauros* denotes an "upright pale" or "stake", and is translated "cross" twenty seven times. The word *xylon* always means "wood" or "tree" and is translated "cross" four times and "tree" one time. It is interesting that in speaking of the death of Christ in their preaching the Apostles always used the word "*xylon*" and Paul quotes an example from the O.T. and uses the word "tree" (Acts 5:30; 10:39; 13:29; I Pet. 2:24; Gal. 3:13). The same word translated "cross" in these scriptures is translated "wood" in I Corinthians 3:12; II Timothy 2:20; Revelation 9:20 and 18:12.

At this time dubious and ambivalent voices will be raised asking, "The important thing is that Jesus was crucified, not the shape of the means of crucifixion, what difference does it make?" In answer to that question consider the following. 1. *The Encyclopedia Britannica* states: "In the Egyptian churches, the cross was a pagan symbol of life borrowed by Christians and interpreted in the pagan manner." To quote Robert L. George writing in *Extra Biblical Exegeses*: "Every Christian has a responsibility to adhere to truth; especially when it relates to pure worship of the true God. Many pagan practices have filtered their way through the centuries to become man-made traditions,

which are not biblical teaching” (Mark 7:13; Col.2:8). 2. The sufferings of Jesus and the horrible death He died are more vividly portrayed in the impalement on a stake than on crossbeams. 3. It is not easy to have an emotional attachment to a “stake”. 4. God’s word is His revelation and everything He wants us to know and believe is revealed in His word. Therefore every word is important and we should know what they mean. 5. The translators should be honest in translating the Scriptures and give us an accurate knowledge of the word of God, which is not always the case.

On the subject of the cross W .E. Vine in *Expository Dictionary of New Testament Words* states: “STAUROS denotes, primarily, an upright pale or stake. On such malefactors were nailed for execution. Both the noun and verb *stauroo*, to fasten to a stake or pale, are originally distinguished from the ecclesiastical form of a two beamed cross. The shape of the latter had its origin in ancient Chaldea, and was used as a symbol of the god Tammuz in that country and in adjacent lands, including Egypt. By the middle of the 3rd. century A.D. the churches had either departed from, or had travestied, certain doctrines of the Christian faith. In order to increase the prestige of the apostate ecclesiastical system pagans were received into the churches apart from regeneration by faith, and were permitted largely to retain their pagan signs and symbols. Hence the Tau or T, in its most frequent form, with the cross-piece lowered, was adopted to stand for the cross of Christ.”

This article is not to belittle the cross. It is simply to point out the fact that Christians should be more careful in making any symbol a part of their worship, and to say as important as the death of Christ is, we should move on to the life His death gives.

WHAT NEW DOCTRINE IS THIS?

This is the question the Athenian philosophers asked as they brought Paul into the Areopagus to hear him speak because, they said, “you are bringing some strange things to our ears, we want to know what these things mean” (Acts 17:19, 20). To many modern churches and Christians the resurrection and ascension of Christ remains a “strange doctrine”. Popular prophesy preachers have transformed the message of Christ’s resurrection and bodily ascension into a doctrine of the church’s bodily ascension in rapture without death. In a book published sixty-four years ago George Beasley-Murray in *Christ Is Alive!* wrote: “That which had been the central affirmation of the first disciples is now of no importance to the average Christian. It is not talked about, it is not preached on, it is not even wondered at; it is simply ignored. The effect of Christian thought of this neglect of the resurrection and ascension of our Lord can scarcely be exaggerated. For the largest section of Christendom, the fitting symbol of Christianity is a crucifix; the impression is given to the world that the Savior is someone over whom we should weep. Even Protestants, in their constructions of the doctrine of the cross, have left Christ on it and presumed that His saving work finishes with His death. The atonement is consequently explained in terms of a sacrifice on our behalf, a payment of our debt, a revelation of God’s love, *and that is all*. It somehow seems to have been overlooked that the resurrection is an integral part of our Lord’s work for us, so that salvation is essentially a deliverance from a living death in sin to a new life of righteousness in God.” If the gospel teaches

anything about the Christian life, it is that close connection between confidence in Christ’s resurrection and the way one lives. “For we know that Christ being raised from the dead will never die again, death no longer has dominion over him...so also you must consider yourselves dead to sin and alive to God in union with Christ Jesus. Let not sin reign, therefore, in your mortal bodies, to make you obey their passions...but yield yourselves to God as persons who have been brought from death to life” (Rom. 6:9, 11-13). As to the ascension, which is barely mentioned in modern theologies, virtually unknown in our pulpits, and consciously ignored in the mass of Christian literature flooding the market today; it is the one New Testament teaching which defines the meaning of the death and resurrection of Christ. It seems to have been over looked that the resurrection and ascension is an integral part of our Lord’s work in making salvation possible. The new life is Christ’s resurrection life, mediated by the Holy Spirit given on the day of Pentecost upon His ascension (Acts 2). The resurrection determines our view of the afterlife; too long the Christian teaching on immortality has been dominated by Greek philosophy instead of the revelation of God given in the resurrection of Christ. To the Christian immortality is resurrection.

By neglecting the Scriptural teaching on the resurrection and the ascension we have looked upon our future life as being a life of a “bodiless spirit”. Our emphasis in salvation has been upon the “soul” and has denied the concept of bodily salvation. The Bible never speaks of the salvation of a bodiless soul. To the apostle Paul “the redemption of our body” is the hoped for salvation proclaimed in the gospel and in terms of this hope we are saved (Rom. 8:23, 24). The goal of Paul’s faith is “to attain the resurrection of the dead” (Phil. 3:8-11). Again, what qualifies Jesus as “Savior” is that he is bodily risen from the dead; and when He returns He “will change our lowly body conforming it to his glorious body by the (resurrection) power which enables Him even to subject all things to Himself” (Phil. 3:20-21). Here too, salvation is bodily, a future event whereby our personal identity will be transformed to the bodily existence to which He was raised. The Apostle John stated it in these words: “Beloved, now we are children of God, and it has not appeared as yet what we shall be. We know that, when He appears, we shall be like Him, because we shall see Him just as He is. And everyone who has this hope fixed on Him purifies himself, just as He is pure” (I John 3:2, 3). This means that the resurrection of Christ not only assures us a hope for the future, it radically affects the way we live here and now. As Paul states in Romans 8:11: “If the Spirit of Him who raised Jesus from the dead dwells in you, He who raised Christ Jesus from the dead will also give life to your mortal bodies through His Spirit who dwells in you.” He is not speaking of our immortal bodies that we receive in our resurrection, but our physical bodies here and now. “Do you not know that your body is a temple of the Holy Spirit who is in you, whom you have from God...for you have been bought with a price; therefore glorify God in your body” (I Cor. 6:19, 20). Simply put the more we divorce ourselves from the body (giving rise to the belief that spirits of the dead are on the other side and know what we are doing on earth and can be contacted on our behalf, giving psychics and mediums a field day) the saving significance of Christ’s resurrection and ascension fades from view. No wonder the Athenian philosophers were confused, and many Christians today share in that confusion.

