

Why the cross?

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Evangelical Press

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First published 2011

This edition 2017

British Library Cataloguing in Publication Data available

ISBN 978-1-78397-216-6

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Evangelical Press, an imprint of 10Publishing

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Why the cross?

It has been estimated that there are 37,000,000 churches in the world today, including over 34,000 Christian denominations. These groups were formed at various times over the past 2,000 years, and do not all see eye to eye on every point of Christian doctrine, yet in trying to get their message across to the world they all use the same symbol. This is made up of two simple lines, one vertical and the other lying horizontally across it about two-thirds of the way up.

In religion, industry, politics and elsewhere, symbols are used as a means of identification, often in a compact and immediate way. Over the centuries they have sometimes been used to claim power or supremacy, to produce fear or insecurity, or even to convey hate or anger. Many are easily recognized, one of the most powerful and emotive in the past century being the Nazi swastika. Opponents during the notorious 'Troubles' in Northern Ireland, which lasted for thirty years from the 1960s and cost over 3,000 lives, often used eye-catching and dramatic symbols. Some of these showed armed and hooded men and covered the outer walls of buildings in Belfast and elsewhere. At first glance, the symbol used to identify Christianity seems strange, as the vertical and horizontal lines form a cross, which represents a barbaric form of execution so cruel that it was abolished by the Roman Empire in AD337.

Over the centuries, authorities have used many different means of executing criminals and enemies. These have included stoning, the guillotine, the firing squad, hanging, electrocution, gassing and lethal injection. In almost all these cases the death of the victim is instantaneous, while in the others the death throes last only a few minutes. From the fourth century BC onwards at least four powers, including the Roman Empire, employed a form of execution that was indescribably painful and prolonged—crucifixion. The word comes from the Latin for ‘fix to a cross,’ and this cruel and savage practice was used for about 1,000 years. In AD337 it was abolished in the Roman Empire by Emperor Constantine I, yet for nearly 2,000 years a cross has been the universally recognized symbol of Christianity, whose founder, Jesus Christ, was crucified on the outskirts of Jerusalem. The British author Malcolm Muggeridge called it ‘the most famous death in history,’¹ but what is not immediately obvious is why a cross should be the Christian church’s symbol of choice. It might be difficult to think of one that would represent Jesus’ moral example, or the miracles attributed to him, but at first glance it seems grotesque to highlight his death in this way.

The symbol of the cross has now been sanitized in such a way that it seems to have lost its macabre

¹ *The Observer*, 26 March 1967

associations. It is on millions of books, buildings and bodies; it decorates the clothing of countless people during their lives and is often etched on their gravestones when they die. There are people for whom the symbol of the cross has a deeply personal and infinitely precious significance, but for others it is little more than a charm or good-luck mascot. It is strange that it has such widespread appeal to millions who have little or no interest in the event that triggered the trend. Are any other instruments of death universally popular in these ways? To understand the significance of the cross as a symbol we need to take a close look at the original event.

The last day

Jesus' execution was a judicial death penalty carried out by the Romans, who occupied Israel at the time. Jesus led a low-profile life in his teens and twenties, but suddenly came to people's attention when he began his public teaching at about thirty years of age. Many of the events from then on were recorded by some of his followers — Matthew, Mark, Luke and John — each of whom wrote a New Testament book, collectively called 'the Gospels' ('gospel' means 'good news'). Such was the impact of Jesus' ministry that 'his fame spread throughout all Syria' and 'great crowds followed him from Galilee and the Decapolis, and from Jerusalem and Judea, and from beyond the Jordan' (Matthew 4:24-25). Yet not

everybody appreciated what he was saying. His teaching infuriated the religious establishment, especially the Pharisees and the Sadducees. They had a vested interest in preserving the status quo, and Jesus' teaching cut across their carefully crafted traditions. The more popular Jesus became, the more they opposed him.

One line of attack was to feed him questions they thought would embarrass or confuse him, but he easily dealt with these, and people were amazed at the way he turned the tables on his enemies (see Matthew 22:23-33). Eventually, his critics decided that there was only one way to stop him: 'The chief priests and the elders of the people... plotted together in order to arrest Jesus by stealth and kill him' (Matthew 26:3-4). Stealth was needed because they were afraid that the crowds who had seen his miracles would turn against them.

As the situation became increasingly tense, the plotters received help from an unexpected source. Judas Iscariot was the only non-Galilean among Jesus' first disciples, but made such a good impression on the others that they let him handle their corporate funds. This was a bad move because at heart Judas 'was a thief, and having charge of the money bag he used to help himself to what was put into it' (John 12:6). Worse was to follow. Perhaps disappointed that Jesus was not planning to overthrow the Romans, Judas decided to betray him

to the religious authorities. They offered him ‘thirty pieces of silver’ (Matthew 26:15) to do this, and he shook hands on the deal.

Shortly afterwards, Judas identified Jesus to an armed mob by greeting him with a kiss. Jesus was arrested, bound and taken to Annas, who had been the first high priest of the Roman province of Judea. Deposed for exceeding his authority, but still a powerful influence in the land, he ‘questioned Jesus about his disciples and his teaching’ (John 18:19). When Jesus said that he had always spoken openly, and that if Annas wanted to know what his teaching was he could ask anyone who heard him, one of the officers slapped him in the face and said, ‘Is that how you answer the high priest?’ (John 18:22). Annas was clearly getting nowhere, so he sent Jesus to his son-in-law Caiaphas, who had been appointed high priest in his place.

The religious authorities were unable to produce any evidence to sustain a charge against Jesus, but two false witnesses testified that he had claimed he would destroy Jerusalem’s magnificent temple and rebuild it in three days (see Matthew 26:60-61). Asked by Caiaphas whether this was true, Jesus remained silent. When an infuriated Caiaphas asked him, ‘I charge you under oath by the living God: Tell us if you are the Christ, the Son of God,’ Jesus’ reply was electrifying: ‘Yes, it is as you say’ (Matthew 26:63,64, NIV). This was the last straw for Caiaphas.

He declared Jesus guilty of blasphemy, and when he asked the other religious leaders what should be done with him they replied, 'He deserves death' (Matthew 26:66).

Early the next morning the chief priests and elders confirmed the sentence, but as they had no authority to carry it out they took Jesus to Pontius Pilate, the Roman governor of Judea. In the meantime, Judas was suddenly 'seized with remorse' (Matthew 27:3, NIV) and tried to return the thirty pieces of silver, telling the chief priests and elders, 'I have sinned by betraying innocent blood' (Matthew 27:4). When they refused to take the money back, Judas threw the coins into the temple and 'went and hanged himself' (Matthew 27:5).

Standing before Pilate, Jesus refused to respond to the charges brought against him. Frustrated that he could find no fault in Jesus, Pilate suddenly saw a way of offloading the case. When he discovered that Jesus was from Galilee, he sent him to face Herod Antipas, the Jewish ruler of Galilee, who was in Jerusalem at the time.

Herod was glad to handle the case as he had heard a lot about Jesus and even hoped he might see him perform a miracle. He was to be doubly disappointed; not only did Jesus refuse to oblige, he never even opened his mouth, even when Herod 'questioned him at some length' (Luke 23:9). Furious and frustrated, Herod and his soldiers 'treated him

with contempt and mocked him' (Luke 23:11) and he was sent back to Pilate.

Pointing out that neither he nor Herod found Jesus guilty of the charges brought against him, Pilate intended scourging Jesus and letting him go, but then thought of a better option. During the annual Passover Feast, an important Jewish festival being celebrated at the time, it was the governor's custom to release one prisoner chosen by the people. Pilate asked the crowd to choose between Jesus and a prisoner called Barabbas, a notorious anarchist and robber. As none of the charges against Jesus could be made to stick, the right choice seemed obvious but, urged on by the religious leaders, the crowd chose Barabbas. When Pilate asked what should be done with Jesus they shouted, 'Let him be crucified!' Baffled and confused, Pilate asked them, 'Why, what evil has he done?' Ignoring the question, the crowd shouted even louder, 'Let him be crucified!' (Matthew 27:22-23).

Sensing that there could soon be a riot, Pilate told the crowd, 'I am innocent of this man's blood; see to it yourselves' (Matthew 27:24), then washed his hands in a bowl of water as a sign that he was not responsible for what might be about to happen. He then released Barabbas and handed Jesus over to soldiers to be crucified, but with instructions that he should first be scourged. Scourging was a vicious form of torture in which a whip of leather strands

loaded with pieces of bone or metal was used to flay the victim, sometimes killing him in the process.

Matthew records what happened next:

And they stripped him and put a scarlet robe on him, and twisting together a crown of thorns, they put it on his head and put a reed in his right hand. And kneeling before him, they mocked him, saying, 'Hail, King of the Jews!' And they spat on him and took the reed and struck him on the head. And when they had mocked him, they stripped him of the robe and put his own clothes on him and led him away to crucify him (Matthew 27:28-31).

In crucifixion, the victim was stripped naked and forced to lie face upwards with his shoulders resting on a beam of wood. His outstretched arms were pinned to the beam with nails, possibly driven in just above the wrist. The beam was then lifted up and secured to a large upright post already driven into the ground. Some ancient records point to another nail, or nails, pinning the victim's feet to the upright, and others to a small saddle that would partially support the weight of the body. These were not intended to help the victim, but to keep him alive for longer and so prolong the pain. Some victims suffered appalling agony for several days before dying of blood loss, suffocation, exhaustion,