



"Tolerance is the virtue of a man without convictions."
—G.K. Chesterton

14-Jul-17

Is the Symbol of the Cross Idolatry? (Part Two)

In Part One, we saw that the New Testament authors say Jesus was crucified on a *stauros*, which is a pole or stake. However, the "traditional" cross is a stake with a cross-member resembling the ancient letter *tau*. In addition to the tau cross, *Vine's Expository Dictionary of Old and New Testament Words* also comments on another of its forms:

As for the Chi, or X, which Constantine declared he had seen in a vision leading him to champion the Christian [faith](#), that letter was the initial of the word "Christ" and had nothing to do with "the Cross" The *stauros* denotes (a) the cross, or stake itself, e.g., Matt. 27:32; (b) [the crucifixion](#) suffered, e.g., I Cor. 1:17, 18, where "the word of the cross," R.V. stands for [the Gospel](#); Gal. 5:11, where the crucifixion is metaphorically used of the renunciation of [the world](#), that characterizes the true Christian life; [Gal.] 6:12, 14; Eph. 2:16; Phil. 3:18.

Vine mentions the Roman Emperor Constantine and his vision. As it is taught today, history credits Constantine with converting to Christianity and making it the state religion. After the Emperor Diocletian abdicated in AD 305, the Roman Empire was divided between two Caesars, Constantine and Galerius, which soon became six emperors, including Maxentius and Licinius. Once he became emperor, Constantine ruled the Western Empire with great vigor. More tolerant of Jews and Christians, he avoided the civil wars and revolts that afflicted other parts of the Empire. By the way,

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though his Edict of Milan (AD 313) promised to treat Christians benevolently, he himself was not baptized until just before his death in 337.

Before a major battle against Maxentius in October 312, Constantine supposedly had a vision. While marching with his forces in the afternoon, a cross—or was it?—appeared in the sky with this inscription, "By this conquer" (Greek, *En tout níka*). Was he drunk, hallucinating, or merely attempting to motivate the troops? We cannot say. In any case, he had his soldiers paint an X on their shields, the initial of the name "Christ," as the Greek X (*chi*) is equivalent to English *ch*.

Only a little effort is required to find that Constantine believed he was to conquer in the name of *Christ*, not by the cross. Using the cross, as we know it, as the symbol to stir his army to honor Christ would make no sense. His troops, being from pagan backgrounds, would have been all-too-familiar with the sign of the cross being the symbol of various pagan gods. Coins struck sometime later, as well as writings from the period, confirm that Constantine used the letter X, the initial of "Christ," not a cross.

Nowhere in the Bible are we told to venerate the symbol of the cross. The early church certainly did not. It was not until AD 431 that the cross was introduced into Catholic churches. In AD 586, it was added to steeples. In the sixth century, the Roman church sanctioned the crucifix image. *The Catholic Encyclopedia*, in its article "The True Cross," tries to explain why the symbol of the cross is found on so many Egyptian monuments that predate Christ: ". . . the Christians of Egypt seem to have recognized an anticipatory revelation of the Christian Cross, and which they employed in their monuments." What clever double-speak—"anticipatory revelation"!

The argument can be made that Christ did not even die on a cross. But there is no reason to get caught up in a debate on whether He was crucified on a tree or a stake (and He carried only the cross piece to Golgotha) or on a fully-assembled, 200-pound Latin cross. Regardless of which it was, should it be worshipped? All we need to do is remember God's second commandment:

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](#)).

How much clearer could it be? No image or likeness of *anything*! It is a curiosity, though, how human nature repeatedly feels the need to focus their worship on something

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tangible. When the children of Israel were journeying to the Promised Land, they became discouraged on many occasions. On one of these, they murmured so strongly against God and [Moses](#) that God sent snakes into the camp. Many people were bitten and died. The people repented, and Moses prayed for relief. The Lord ordered Moses to make a "fiery serpent and set it on a pole." Anyone that looked at this image lived ([Numbers 21:4-9](#)).

So where did the people's thanks go after they were spared? To God or to this bronze snake? Far too many of the Israelites began to worship the image, a precursor of things to come.

For whatever reason, this bronze image was preserved through the generations. Hundreds of years later, Israel, a vassal state to Assyria, is about to go into captivity because of their idolatry (II Kings 17). Neighboring Judah has a chance to watch and learn. At the time of Israel's captivity, Judah's king is a good one, Hezekiah. Only 25 years old as he began his reign, he nonetheless "did what was right in the sight of the LORD" ([II Kings 18:1-3](#)). "He removed the high places and broke the sacred pillars, cut down the wooden images and broke in pieces the bronze serpent that Moses had made; for until those days the children of Israel burned incense to it" (verse 4). The people had been worshipping an image rather than God.

God hates idolatry. Why would He consider the symbol of the cross any differently? While some may justify having one by saying that the cross serves to remind them of [Jesus Christ](#), it is really nothing more than a "bronze serpent."

There is no biblical connection between the true Son of God and the cross of Tammuz. Hanging a cross on the walls of one's home or from a chain around one's neck puts a person at odds with God. Since He has commanded us not to do this and tells us plainly that He is "a jealous God," this is not a position any of us would want to be in.

- Mike Ford

From the Archives: Featured Sermon

[Real Conversion](#)

by Richard T. Ritenbaugh

Richard Ritenbaugh contends that conversion, like salvation is a process that begins at a particular event in time (after our repentance, baptism, and receiving of God's Holy

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Spirit) but requires a maturing period in which we, using God's Holy Spirit, mortify the flesh and produce fruit. The process of conversion is actually God's workmanship creating a new spiritual being (putting off the old man and putting on the new man) with godly spiritual character- the image of Christ. This process requires continual growth and transformation from the mind of Satan to the mind of Christ (I Corinthians 2:16), allowing us to discern from God's perspective.

From the Archives: Featured Article

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by John W. Ritenbaugh

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