“God forbid that I should boast of anything but the cross of our Lord Jesus Christ”

Galatians 6:14 NEB
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Sermon on the Mount
Scripture
1 & 2 Thessalonians
1 Timothy & Titus
2 Timothy
Dedicated to

Frances Whitehead

in gratitude for 30 years of outstandingly loyal and efficient service

1956-1986
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In the twenty years since its publication, John Stott’s *The Cross of Christ* has established itself as the most respected and authoritative evangelical writing on this most important of subjects. It remains the standard work on its great themes, inspiring, challenging, encouraging and informing its many readers. It is, in my view, John Stott’s greatest and best work, written at the height of his career, when he was sixty-five years old. We see in its pages more of this great writer’s mind and heart than in any other of his many writings. It is as if he waited until he felt he was ready to write on so great a theme, enabling him to distil the theological precision, pastoral wisdom and rhetorical gifts of a lifetime. If this is so, it was definitely worth waiting for.

Why is this book so important? At one level, its significance lies in its being the masterpiece of the Christian who is widely regarded as one of the greatest Christian writers, speakers, thinkers and leaders of the twentieth century. John Stott was born in 1921, the son of Sir Arnold Stott, a leading Harley Street physician, noted for his agnosticism as much as his medical skills. He was educated at Rugby School, where he became head boy. Although spiritually inquisitive, he could not at first find any meaningful association between faith and life. As he later recalled:

As a typical adolescent, I was aware of two things about myself, though doubtless I could not have articulated them in these terms then. First, if there was a God, I was estranged from him. I tried to find him, but he seemed to be enveloped in a fog I could not penetrate. Secondly, I was defeated. I knew the kind of person I was, and also the kind of person I longed to be. Between the ideal and the reality there was a great gulf fixed. I had high ideals but a weak will.1

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Yet this spiritual restlessness came to an end after John Stott heard Eric Nash give a talk to the Rugby School Christian Union in February 1938. As he recalls, “what brought me to Christ was this sense of defeat and of estrangement, and the astonishing news that the historic Christ offered to meet the very needs of which I was conscious.” As he later reflected on his conversion:

That night at my bedside I made the experiment of faith, and “opened the door” to Christ. I saw no flash of lightning . . . in fact I had no emotional experience at all. I just crept into bed and went to sleep. For weeks afterwards, even months, I was unsure what had happened to me. But gradually I grew, as the diary I was writing at the time makes clear, into a clearer understanding and a firmer assurance of the salvation and lordship of Jesus Christ.²

John Stott went on to Cambridge University, taking first-class honors in modern languages, then, as he trained for ministry in the Church of England, in theology. In 1945 he became curate at the London church now firmly associated with his name and ministry—All Souls, Langham Place. In a highly unusual move, John Stott was appointed rector of this church in 1950 and remained in this position for twenty-five years. During this time, All Souls became the center of John Stott’s dynamic ministry, including pioneering work involving guest services, student missions and a punishing speaking schedule which took him all over the world.

So what gave such energy to this mission? What resource both propelled John Stott into this ministry and sustained him throughout? To read this book is to find the answer. John Stott found—and enables his readers to find—the intellectual and spiritual riches of the cross that sustain the life of discipleship, especially in times of darkness and difficulty. John Stott’s carefully calibrated analysis of the significance of the cross enables us to gain an appreciation of how “the cross transforms everything . . . [giving] us a new, worshiping relationship to God, a new and balanced understanding of ourselves, a new incentive to give ourselves in mission, a new love for our enemies, and a new courage to face the perplexities of suffering.”³ At point after point, readers of this book will realize how and why the cross stands at the center of John Stott’s faith and ministry.

John Stott would insist, however, that the importance of the book ultimately lies in the subject itself. There is no greater, no more challenging task for a Christian leader than to set out the meaning of the cross for the church and for the world. John Stott’s masterly examination takes the form of four major sections:

²Ibid., pp. 93–94.
“Approaching the Cross,” “The Heart of the Cross,” “The Achievement of the Cross,” and “Living Under the Cross.” The first section offers a survey of Christian history, reflecting on the remarkable way in which the cross became the central theme and foundational image of the Christian faith.

For many readers, however, it is the second and third sections of the work that bring us to the heart of the gospel. In a bold yet careful investigation of the human situation, John Stott demonstrates our incapacity to change our own situation. We are sinners; and how can such sinners hope to stand in the presence of a holy and righteous God? How can we hope to gain access to such a God when everything about our nature seems to stand in our way? John Stott’s answer is classic in itself, and classic in its inspiration: a divine redeemer was needed, able to bring God’s salvation to the human situation. “Neither Christ alone as man nor the Father alone as God could be our substitute. Only God in Christ, God the Father’s own and only Son made man, could take our place.”

The cross is the place at which God brings his salvation and revelation to sinful humanity. John Stott’s exploration is marked by a clarity of biblical exposition and precision of theological dissection which few could hope to achieve. It is at present, as it has been for the last twenty years, the best and most persuasive account of the classic evangelical understanding of the meaning of the cross.

The final section of the work explores the relation between the cross and Christian discipleship in the church and world. We are called to abandon “our supposed right to go on our own way,” and come under the authority of the crucified Christ.

To deny ourselves is to behave toward ourselves as Peter did toward Jesus when he denied him three times. The verb is the same (aparneomai). He disowned him, repudiated him, turned his back on him. Self-denial is not denying to ourselves luxuries such as chocolates, cakes, cigarettes and cocktails (though it might include this); it is actually denying or disowning ourselves, renouncing our supposed right to go our own way.

The way we think and the way we act must be shaped by the cross. Though this book deals thoroughly with theories of the atonement, John Stott explores its relevance far beyond this traditional horizon, examining its implications for Christian discipleship, the sacraments, and the enigmas of faith. John is at his best when exploring the link between the cross and spiritual concerns, perhaps nowhere as well as when he explores how Christians are enabled to bear the bur-

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*Ibid., p. 159.*

*Ibid., p. 272.*
den of suffering through the cross of Christ.

Any book has weaknesses, some intrinsic, others resulting from the passing of the years. For example, at certain points, John Stott makes judgments on issues of biblical scholarship which might merit revisiting in the light of the last twenty years of publications in this field. Equally, new works of theological scholarship have appeared, moving the discussion on over certain matters. I would personally judge that John Stott would not feel any particular need to change any of his main conclusions in the light of what I would take to be his evaluation of those developments. Nevertheless, it would be helpful to have his response to some of these scholarly shifts and his assessment of their significance. At other points, the rapid changes in culture since the book was first written have perhaps left parts of the book’s final section a little less persuasive than they were on their original appearance. Yet even with the passage of twenty years, the acuteness of John Stott’s judgment remains impressive.

This, then, is a book that will amply repay study. Its continuing impact and relevance after the passage of twenty years since its publication suggests that this book has all the makings of a classic—a work written in and for one generation, which its successors continue to find important and illuminating.

Alister McGrath
Professor of Historical Theology, Oxford University
October 2005
I count it an enormous privilege to have been invited by Inter-Varsity Press to write a book on that greatest and most glorious of all subjects, the cross of Christ. I have emerged from the several years of work involved spiritually enriched, with my convictions clarified and strengthened, and with a firm resolve to spend the rest of my days on earth (as I know the whole redeemed company will spend eternity in heaven) in the liberating service of Christ crucified.

It is appropriate that a book on the cross should form part of the golden jubilee celebrations of Inter-Varsity Press, to which (under its dedicated leaders Ronald Inchley and Frank Entwistle) the whole Christian reading public is greatly indebted. For the cross is at the center of the evangelical faith. Indeed, as I argue in this book, it lies at the center of the historic, biblical faith, and the fact that this is not always everywhere acknowledged is in itself a sufficient justification for preserving a distinctive evangelical testimony. Evangelical Christians believe that in and through Christ crucified God substituted himself for us and bore our sins, dying in our place the death we deserved to die, in order that we might be restored to his favor and adopted into his family. Dr. J. I. Packer has rightly written that this belief “is a distinguishing mark of the world-wide evangelical fraternity” (even though it “often gets misunderstood and caricatured by its critics”); it “takes us to the very heart of the Christian gospel.”

The centrality of the cross has certainly been a vital factor in the history of what is now the Universities and Colleges Christian Fellowship, together with the world

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body to which it is affiliated, namely the International Fellowship of Evangelical Students. Two events, which took place earlier in this century, were particularly important.

The first was the disaffiliation in 1910 of the Cambridge InterCollegiate Christian Union (founded in 1877) from the Student Christian Movement (founded in 1895). CICCU members were conscious of standing in the tradition of Bilney, Tyndale, Latimer, Ridley and Cranmer, the great names of the Cambridge Reformation. They also looked back with pride and affection to Charles Simeon, who for fifty-four years (1782-1836) as vicar of Holy Trinity Church had faithfully expounded the Scriptures and, as his memorial plaque testifies, “whether as the ground of his own hopes or as the subject of all his ministrations, determined to know nothing but Jesus Christ and him crucified.” It is not surprising, therefore, that they were becoming increasingly disenchanted with the liberal tendencies of the SCM, and especially with its weak doctrines of the Bible, the cross and even the deity of Jesus. So when Tissington Tatlow, general secretary of the SCM, met CICCU members in March 1910, the vote to disaffiliate the Union was taken. The following year Howard Mowll (later to be archbishop of Sydney and primate of Australia) became president of CICCU and helped to establish it on firm evangelical foundations from which it has never been moved.²

After the First World War ended in 1918, many ex-servicemen went up to Cambridge as students. CICCU by now was much smaller than the SCM. Yet the SCM leaders (notably Charles Raven, the dean of Emmanuel) made overtures to the CICCU, hoping that they would rejoin and supply the missing devotional warmth and evangelistic thrust. To resolve the issue, Daniel Dick and Norman Grubb (president and secretary of CICCU) met the SCM committee in the rooms in Trinity Great Court of their secretary, Rollo Pelly. Here is Norman Grubb’s own account of the crucial issue:

After an hour’s talk, I asked Rollo point-blank, “Does the SCM put the atoning blood of Jesus Christ central?” He hesitated, and then said, “Well, we acknowledge it, but not necessarily central.” Dan Dick and I then said that this settled the matter for us in the CICCU. We could never join something that did not maintain the atoning blood of Jesus Christ as its centre; and we parted company.³

This decision not only confirmed the prewar vote to disaffiliate, but “was also

the real foundation of the IVF, for it was only a few months later that the realization dawned on us that if a CICCU was a necessity in Cambridge, a union of the same kind was also a necessity in every University of the world. The first Inter-Varsity Conference was held in London in December 1919.

During this period Norman Grubb quoted 1 Corinthians 15:3-4 as a key text in their thinking: “For I delivered to you as of first importance what I also received, that Christ died for our sins in accordance with the scriptures, that he was buried, that he was raised on the third day in accordance with the scriptures” (RSV). It would be hard to square with this the SCM’s 1919 Aim and Basis, which included the following statement about the cross: “It is only as we see on Calvary the price of suffering paid day by day by God himself for all human sin, that we can enter into the experience of true penitence and forgiveness, which sets us free to embark upon a wholly new way of life. This is the meaning of the Atonement.” But we have respectfully to respond that the meaning of the atonement is not to be found in our penitence evoked by the sight of Calvary, but rather in what God did when in Christ on the cross he took our place and bore our sin.

This distinction between an “objective” and “subjective” understanding of the atonement needs to be made clear in every generation. According to Dr. Douglas Johnson, the first general secretary of the IVF, this discovery was the turning point in the ministry of Dr. Martyn Lloyd Jones, who occupied an unrivaled position of evangelical leadership in the decades following the Second World War. He confided in several friends that “a fundamental change took place in his outlook and preaching in the year 1929.” He had, of course, emphasized from the beginning of his ministry the indispensable necessity of the new birth. But after preaching one night in Bridgend, South Wales, the minister challenged him that “the cross and the work of Christ” appeared to have little place in his preaching. He went “at once to his favourite secondhand bookshop and asked the proprietor for the two standard books on the Atonement. The bookseller . . . produced R. W. Dale’s The Atonement (1875) and James Denney’s The Death of Christ (1903). On his return home he gave himself to study, declining both lunch and tea, and causing his wife such anxiety that she telephoned her brother to see whether a doctor should be called. But when he later emerged, he claimed to have found “the real heart of the gospel and the key to the inner meaning of the Christian faith.” So the content of his

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preaching changed, and with this its impact. As he himself put it, the basic question was not Anselm's “why did God become man?” but “why did Christ die?”

Because of the vital importance of the atonement, and of an understanding of it which reclaims from misrepresentation the great biblical concepts of substitution, satisfaction and propitiation, two things have greatly surprised me. The first is how unpopular the doctrine remains. Some theologians evince a strange reluctance to subscribe to it, even when its biblical basis becomes clear to them. I think, for example, of that noted Methodist New Testament scholar, Vincent Taylor. His careful and comprehensive scholarship is exemplified in his three books on the cross: *Jesus and His Sacrifice* (1937), *The Atonement in New Testament Teaching* (1940) and *Forgiveness and Reconciliation* (1946). He employs many adjectives to describe the death of Christ, such as “vicarious,” “redemptive,” “reconciling,” “expiatory,” “sacrificial” and especially “representative.” But he cannot bring himself to call it “substitutionary.” After a close examination of primitive Christian preaching and belief, of Paul, Hebrews and John, he writes of the work of Christ: “In none of the passages we have examined is it described as that of a substitute. . . . Nowhere have we found any support for such views.”

Yet even as Vincent Taylor made these astonishing statements, he was clearly uneasy in making them. Their vehemence leaves us unprepared for the concessions which he later feels obliged to make. “Perhaps the most striking feature of New Testament teaching concerning the representative work of Christ,” he writes, “is the fact that it comes so near, without actually crossing, the bounds of substitutionary doctrine. Paulinism, in particular, is within a hair’s breadth of substitution.” He even confesses of New Testament theologians that “too often we are content to deny substitution without replacing it,” and that it is a notion “we have perhaps been more anxious to reject than to assess.” What, however, I shall try to show in this book, is that the biblical doctrine of atonement is substitutionary from beginning to end. What Vincent Taylor shrank from was not the doctrine itself, but the crudities of thought and expression of which the advocates of substitution have not infrequently been guilty.

My second surprise, in view of the centrality of the cross of Christ, is that no

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6I am grateful to Dr. Douglas Johnson for supplying me with this information, which supplements the account given by Iain H. Murray in *David Martyn Lloyd Jones* (Carlisle, Penn.: Banner of Truth Trust, 1982), pp. 190-91.


8Ibid., p. 270.

9Ibid., p. 288.

10Ibid., pp. 289, 301.
book on this topic has been written by an evangelical author for thoughtful readers (until two or three years ago) for nearly half a century. True, there have been several small paperbacks, and there have been some scholarly works. I would like to pay special tribute to the outstanding labors in this field of Dr. Leon Morris of Melbourne, Australia. His *Apostolic Preaching of the Cross* (1955) has put all of us in his debt, and I am glad that he has brought its contents within reach of laypeople in *The Atonement* (1983). He has made himself master of the extensive literature of the ages on this theme, and his *The Cross in the New Testament* (1965) remains probably the most comprehensive survey available. From it I quote with warm endorsement his statement that “the cross dominates the New Testament.”

Until the publication, however, of Ronald Wallace’s *The Atoning Death of Christ* (1981) and Michael Green’s *The Empty Cross of Jesus* (1984), I do not know of an evangelical book for the readership I have in mind since H. E. Guillebaud’s *Why the Cross?* (1937), which was one of the very first books published by IVF. It was a courageous work, meeting the critics of a substitutionary atonement head on, and asking the three questions: (1) “is it Christian?” (i.e., compatible with the teaching of Jesus and his apostles); (2) “is it immoral?” (i.e., compatible or incompatible with justice); and (3) “is it incredible?” (i.e., compatible or incompatible with such problems as time and the transfer of guilt).

My concern is to range more widely, for this is not a book on the atonement only, but on the cross. After the three introductory chapters which form part one, I come in part two to what I have called “the heart of the cross,” in which I argue for a truly biblical understanding of the notions of satisfaction and substitution. In part three, I move on to the three great achievements of the cross, namely saving sinners, revealing God and conquering evil. But part four grapples with areas that are often omitted from books on the cross, namely what it means for the Christian community to “live under the cross.” I try to show that the cross transforms everything. It gives us a new, worshiping relationship to God, a new and balanced understanding of ourselves, a new incentive to give ourselves in mission, a new love for our enemies, and a new courage to face the perplexities of suffering.

In developing my theme, I have had in mind the triangle of Scripture, tradition and the modern world. My first anxiety has been to be true to the Word of God, allowing it to say what it has to say and not asking it to say what I might want it to say. There is no alternative to careful exegesis of the text. Second, I have endeavored to share some of the fruits of my reading. In seeking to understand the cross,

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one cannot ignore the great works of the past. To be disrespectful of tradition and of historical theology is to be disrespectful of the Holy Spirit who has been actively enlightening the church in every century. Then, third, I have tried to understand Scripture, not only in its own light and in the light of tradition but also in relation to the contemporary world. I have asked what the cross of Christ says to us at the end of the twentieth century.

In daring to write (and read) a book about the cross, there is of course a great danger of presumption. This is partly because what actually happened when “God was reconciling the world to himself in Christ” is a mystery whose depths we shall spend eternity plumbing; and partly because it would be most unseemly to feign a cool detachment as we contemplate Christ’s cross. For, whether we like it or not, we are involved. Our sins put him there. So, far from offering us flattery, the cross undermines our self-righteousness. We can stand before it only with a bowed head and a broken spirit. And there we remain until the Lord Jesus speaks to our hearts his word of pardon and acceptance, and we, gripped by his love and full of thanksgiving, go out into the world to live our lives in his service.

I am grateful to Roger Beckwith and David Turner for reading portions of the manuscript and for their helpful comments. I thank my four most recent study assistants—Mark Labberton, Steve Ingraham, Bob Wismer and Steve Andrews. Steve Andrews has been characteristically meticulous in reading the manuscript, compiling the bibliography and indexes, checking references and correcting the proofs.

But I reserve until last my heartfelt thanks to Frances Whitehead who in 1986 completed thirty years as my secretary. This book is the umpteenth she has typed. I cannot speak too highly of her efficiency, helpfulness, loyalty and undiminished enthusiasm for the work of the Lord. With much gratitude I dedicate this book to her.

John Stott
Christmas 1985
ABBREVIATIONS

The English text of biblical quotations is that of the New International Version, unless stated to the contrary.


AV  The Authorized (King James') Version of the Bible, 1611.

JB  The Jerusalem Bible (Darton, Longman and Todd, 1966).

LXX  The Old Testament in Greek according to the Septuagint, 3rd century B.C.


Do you know the painting by Holman Hunt, the leader of the Pre-Raphaelite Brotherhood, titled *The Shadow of Death*? It depicts the inside of the carpenter's shop in Nazareth. Stripped to the waist, Jesus stands by a wooden trestle on which he has put down his saw. He lifts his eyes toward heaven, and the look on his face is one of either pain or ecstasy or both. He also stretches, raising both arms above his head. As he does so, the evening sunlight streaming through the open door casts a dark shadow in the form of a cross on the wall behind him, where his tool-rack looks like a horizontal bar on which his hands have been crucified. The tools themselves remind us of the fateful hammer and nails.

In the left foreground a woman kneels among the wood chippings, her hands resting on the chest in which the rich gifts of the Magi are kept. We cannot see her face because she has averted it. But we know that she is Mary. She looks startled (or so it seems) at her son's crosslike shadow on the wall.

The Pre-Raphaelites have a reputation for sentimentality. Yet they were serious and sincere artists, and Holman Hunt himself was determined, as he put it, to “do battle with the frivolous art of the day,” its superficial treatment of trite themes. So he spent 1870-1873 in the Holy Land, and painted *The Shadow of Death* in Jerusalem, as he sat on the roof of his house. Though the idea is historically fictitious, it is also theologically true. From Jesus’ youth, indeed even from his birth, the cross cast its shadow ahead of him. His death was central to his mission. Moreover, the church has always recognized this.

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Imagine a stranger visiting St Paul’s Cathedral in London. Having been brought up in a non-Christian culture, he knows next to nothing about Christianity. Yet he is more than a tourist; he is personally interested and eager to learn.

Walking along Fleet Street, he is impressed by the grandeur of the building’s proportions and marvels that Sir Christopher Wren could have conceived such an edifice after the Great Fire of London in 1666. As his eyes attempt to take it in, he cannot help noticing the huge golden cross that dominates the dome.

He enters the cathedral and stands at its central point, under the dome. Trying to grasp the size and shape of the building, he becomes aware that its ground plan, consisting of nave and transepts, is cruciform. He walks around and observes that each side chapel contains what looks to him like a table, on which, prominently displayed, stands a cross. He goes downstairs into the crypt to see the tombs of famous men such as Sir Christopher Wren himself, Lord Nelson and the Duke of Wellington: a cross is engraved or embossed on each.

Returning upstairs, he decides to remain for the service which is about to begin. The man beside him is wearing a little cross on his lapel, while the lady on his other side has one on her necklace. His eye now rests on the colorful, stained-glass east window. Though he cannot make out the details from where he is sitting, he cannot fail to notice that it contains a cross.

Suddenly, the congregation stands up. The choir and clergy enter, preceded by somebody carrying a processional cross. They are singing a hymn. The visitor looks down at the service paper to read its opening words:

We sing the praise of him who died,
Of him who died upon the cross;
The sinner’s hope let men deride,
For this we count the world but loss.

From what follows he comes to realize that he is witnessing a Holy Communion service, and that this focuses on the death of Jesus. For when the people around him go forward to the Communion rail to receive bread and wine, the minister speaks to them of the body and blood of Christ. The service ends with another hymn:

When I survey the wondrous cross
On which the Prince of glory died,
My richest gain I count but loss,
And pour contempt on all my pride.

Forbid it, Lord, that I should boast
Save in the cross of Christ my God,
All the vain things that charm me most,
I sacrifice them to his blood.

Although the congregation now disperses, a family stays behind. They have brought their child to be baptized. Joining them at the font, the visitor sees the minister first pour water over the child and then trace a cross on its forehead, saying, “I sign you with the cross, to show that you must not be ashamed to confess the faith of Christ crucified.”

The stranger leaves the cathedral impressed but puzzled. The repeated insistence by word and symbol on the centrality of the cross has been striking. Yet questions have arisen in his mind. Some of the language used seemed exaggerated.

Do Christians really for the sake of the cross “count the world but loss,” and “boast” in it alone, and “sacrifice” everything for it? Can the Christian faith be accurately summed up as “the faith of Christ crucified?” What are the grounds, he asks himself, for this concentration on the cross of Christ?

THE SIGN AND SYMBOL OF THE CROSS

Every religion and ideology has its visual symbol, which illustrates a significant feature of its history or beliefs. The lotus flower, for example, although it was used by the ancient Chinese, Egyptians and Indians, is now particularly associated with Buddhism. Because of its wheel shape it is thought to depict either the cycle of birth and death or the emergence of beauty and harmony out of the muddy waters of chaos. Sometimes the Buddha is portrayed as enthroned in a fully open lotus flower.

Ancient Judaism avoided visual signs and symbols, for fear of infringing the second commandment, which prohibits the manufacture of images. But modern Judaism has adopted the so-called Shield or Star of David, a hexagram formed by combining two equilateral triangles. It speaks of God’s covenant with David that his throne would be established forever and that the Messiah would be descended from him. Islam, the other monotheistic faith that arose in the Middle East, is symbolized by a crescent, at least in West Asia. Originally depicting a phase of the moon, it was already the symbol of sovereignty in Byzantium before the Muslim conquest.

The secular ideologies of this century also have their universally recognizable signs. The Marxist hammer and sickle, adopted in 1917 by the Soviet government from a nineteenth-century Belgian painting, represent industry and agriculture; and they are crossed to signify the union of workers and peasants, of factory and field. The swastika, on the other hand, has been traced back some six thousand
years. The arms of its cross are bent clockwise to symbolize either the movement of the sun across the sky, or the cycle of the four seasons, or the process of creativity and prosperity (svasti being a Sanskrit word for “well-being”). At the beginning of this century, however, it was adopted by some German groups as a symbol of the Aryan race. Then Hitler took it over, and it became the sinister sign of Nazi racial bigotry.

Christianity, then, is no exception in having a visual symbol. The cross was not its earliest, however. Because of the wild accusations that were leveled against Christians, and the persecution to which they were exposed, they “had to be very circumspect and to avoid flaunting their religion. Thus the cross, now the universal symbol of Christianity, was at first avoided, not only for its direct association with Christ, but for its shameful association with the execution of a common criminal also.” So on the walls and ceilings of the catacombs (underground burial places outside Rome, where the persecuted Christians probably hid), the earliest Christian motifs seem to have been either noncommittal paintings of a peacock (supposed to symbolize immortality), a dove, the athlete’s victory palm or, in particular, a fish. Only the initiated would know, and nobody else could guess, that ichthys ("fish") was an acronym for Jesus Christos Theou Huios Soter ("Jesus Christ, Son of God, Savior"). But it did not remain the Christian sign, doubtless because the association between Jesus and a fish was purely acronymic (a fortuitous arrangement of letters) and had no visual significance.

Somewhat later, probably during the second century, the persecuted Christians seem to have preferred to paint biblical themes like Noah’s ark, Abraham killing the ram instead of Isaac, Daniel in the lions’ den, his three friends in the fiery furnace, Jonah being disgorged by the fish, some baptisms, a shepherd carrying a lamb, the healing of the paralytic, and the raising of Lazarus. All these were symbolic of Christ’s redemption, while not being in themselves incriminating, since only the instructed would have been able to interpret their meaning. In addition, the Chi-Rho monogram (the first two letters of the Greek word Christos) was a popular cryptogram, often in the form of a cross, and sometimes with a lamb standing before it, or with a dove.

A universally acceptable Christian emblem would obviously need to speak of Jesus Christ, but there was a wide range of possibilities. Christians might have

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chosen the crib or manger in which the baby Jesus was laid, or the carpenter’s bench at which he worked as a young man in Nazareth, dignifying manual labor, or the boat from which he taught the crowds in Galilee, or the apron he wore when washing the apostles’ feet, which would have spoken of his spirit of humble service. Then there was the stone which, having been rolled from the mouth of Joseph’s tomb, would have proclaimed his resurrection. Other possibilities were the throne, symbol of divine sovereignty, which John in his vision of heaven saw that Jesus was sharing, or the dove, symbol of the Holy Spirit sent from heaven on the Day of Pentecost. Any of these seven symbols would have been suitable as a pointer to some aspect of the ministry of the Lord. But instead the chosen symbol came to be a simple cross. Its two bars were already a cosmic symbol from remote antiquity of the axis between heaven and earth. But its choice by Christians had a more specific explanation. They wished to commemorate as central to their understanding of Jesus neither his birth nor his youth, neither his teaching nor his service, neither his resurrection nor his reign, nor his gift of the Spirit, but his death, his crucifixion. The crucifix (that is, a cross to which a figure of Christ is attached) does not appear to have been used before the sixth century.

It seems certain that, at least from the second century onward, Christians not only drew, painted and engraved the cross as a pictorial symbol of their faith but also made the sign of the cross on themselves or others. One of the first witnesses to this practice was Tertullian, the North African lawyer-theologian who flourished about A.D. 200. He wrote:

> At every forward step and movement, at every going in and out, when we put on our clothes and shoes, when we bathe, when we sit at table, when we light the lamps, on couch, on seat, in all the ordinary actions of daily life, we trace upon the forehead the sign [the cross].

Hippolytus, the scholar-presbyter of Rome, is a particularly interesting witness, because he is known to have been “an avowed reactionary who in his own generation stood for the past rather than the future.” His famous treatise *The Apostolic Tradition* (c. A.D. 215) “claims explicitly to be recording only the forms and models of rites already traditional and customs already long-established, and to be written in deliberate protest against innovations.” When he describes certain “church observances,” therefore, we may be sure that they were already being practiced a gen-

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eration or more previously. He mentions that the sign of the cross was used by the bishop when anointing the candidate’s forehead at confirmation, and he recommends it in private prayer: “imitate him (Christ) always, by signing thy forehead sincerely: for this is the sign of his passion.” It is also, he adds, a protection against evil: “When tempted, always reverently seal thy forehead with the sign of the cross. For this sign of the passion is displayed and made manifest against the devil if thou makest it in faith, not in order that thou mayest be seen of men, but by thy knowledge putting it forth as a shield.”

There is no need for us to dismiss this habit as superstitious. In origin at least, the sign of the cross was intended to identify and indeed sanctify each act as belonging to Christ.

In the middle of the third century, when another North African, Cyprian, was bishop of Carthage, a terrible persecution was unleashed by the Emperor Decius (A.D. 250-251) during which thousands of Christians died rather than offer sacrifice to his name. Anxious to strengthen the morale of his people, and to encourage them to accept martyrdom rather than compromise their Christian faith, Cyprian reminded them of the ceremony of the cross: “Let us take also for protection of our head the helmet of salvation . . . that our brow may be fortified, so as to keep safe the sign of God.” As for the faithful who endured prison and risked death, Cyprian praised them in these terms: “Your brows, hallowed by God’s seal . . . reserved themselves for the crown which the Lord would give.”

Richard Hooker, the sixteenth-century Anglican theologian and Master of the Temple in London, applauded the fact that the early church fathers, in spite of heathen scorn at the sufferings of Christ, “chose rather the sign of the cross [that is, in baptism] than any other outward mark, whereby the world might most easily discern always what they were.” He was aware of the forthright objections of the Puritans. “Crossing and such like pieces of Popery,” they were saying, “which the church of God in the Apostles’ time never knew,” ought not to be used, for human inventions ought not to be added to divine institutions, and there was always the danger of superstitious misuse. As King Hezekiah destroyed the brazen serpent, so crossing should be abandoned. But Hooker stood his ground. In “matters indifferent,” which

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5Ibid., pp. 68-69.
were not incompatible with Scripture, Christians were free. Besides, the sign of the
cross had a positive usefulness: it is “for us an admonition . . . to glory in the service
of Jesus Christ, and not to hang down our heads as men ashamed thereof, although
it procure us reproach and obloquy at the hands of this wretched world.”

It was Constantine, the first emperor to profess to be a Christian, who gave
added impetus to the use of the cross symbol. For (according to Eusebius), on the
eve of the Battle of Milvian Bridge, which brought him supremacy in the West (A.D.
312–313), he saw a cross of light in the sky, along with the words in hoc signo vinces
(“conquer by this sign”). He immediately adopted it as his emblem and had it em-
blazoned on the standards of his army.

Whatever we may think of Constantine and of the development of post-
Constantinian “Christendom,” at least the church has faithfully preserved the cross
as its central symbol. In some ecclesiastical traditions the candidate for baptism is
still marked with this sign, and the relatives of a Christian who after death is bur-
ied rather than cremated are likely to have a cross erected over the person’s grave.
Thus from Christian birth to Christian death, as we might put it, the church seeks
to identify and protect us with a cross.

The Christians’ choice of a cross as the symbol of their faith is more surprising
when we remember the horror with which crucifixion was regarded in the ancient
world. We can understand why Paul’s “message of the cross” was to many of his
listeners “foolishness,” even “madness” (1 Cor 1:18, 23). How could any sane per-
son worship as a god a dead man who had been justly condemned as a criminal
and subjected to the most humiliating form of execution? This combination
of death, crime and shame put him beyond the pale of respect, let alone of worship.

Crucifixion seems to have been invented by “barbarians” on the edge of the
known world and taken over from them by both Greeks and Romans. It is proba-
bly the most cruel method of execution ever practiced, for it deliberately delayed
death until maximum torture had been inflicted. The victim could suffer for days
before dying. When the Romans adopted it, they reserved it for criminals con-
victed of murder, rebellion or armed robbery, provided that they were also slaves,
foreigners or other nonpersons. The Jews were therefore outraged when the Ro-
man general Varus crucified two thousand of their compatriots in 4 B.C., and when
during the siege of Jerusalem the general Titus crucified so many fugitives from the

9Ibid., 5.65.6.
10See especially Martin Hengel, Crucifixion, trans. John Bowden (Minneapolis: Fortress, 1977), pp. 1-
10. The original title was Mors torpissima crucis, “the utterly vile death of the cross,” an expression
first used by Origen.
city that neither “space . . . for the crosses, nor crosses for the bodies” could be found.\footnote{See the accounts given by Josephus in Antiquities 17.10.10 and Jewish War 5.11.1.}

Roman citizens were exempt from crucifixion, except in extreme cases of treason. Cicero in one of his speeches condemned it as crudelissimum taeterrimumque supplicium, “a most cruel and disgusting punishment.”\footnote{Cicero Against Verres, in The Verrine Orations, trans. L. H. G. Greenwood (London: Heinemann, 1928-1935), 2.5.64, par. 165.} A little later he declared: “To bind a Roman citizen is a crime, to flog him is an abomination, to kill him is almost an act of murder: to crucify him is—What? There is no fitting word that can possibly describe so horrible a deed.”\footnote{Ibid., 2.5.66, par. 170.} Cicero was even more explicit in his successful defense in 63 B.C. of the elderly senator Gaius Rabirius who had been charged with murder: “the very word ‘cross’ should be far removed not only from the person of a Roman citizen, but from his thoughts, his eyes and his ears. For it is not only the actual occurrence of these things [that is, the procedures of crucifixion] or the endurance of them, but liability to them, the expectation, indeed the mere mention of them, that is unworthy of a Roman citizen and a free man.”\footnote{Cicero In Defense of Rabirius, in The Speeches of Cicero, trans. H. G. Hodge (London: Heinemann, 1927), 5.16, p. 467.}

If the Romans regarded crucifixion with horror, so did the Jews, though for a different reason. They made no distinction between a “tree” and a “cross,” and so between a hanging and a crucifixion. They therefore automatically applied to crucified criminals the terrible statement of the law that “anyone who is hung on a tree is under God’s curse” (Deut 21:23). They could not bring themselves to believe that God’s Messiah would die under his curse, strung up on a tree. As Trypho the Jew put it to Justin the Christian apologist, who engaged him in dialogue: “I am exceedingly incredulous on this point.”\footnote{Justin Martyr Dialogue with Trypho a Jew, in The Ante-Nicene Fathers, vol. 1, ed. A. Roberts and J. Donaldson (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1981), chap. 89.}

So then, whether their background was Roman or Jewish or both, the early enemies of Christianity lost no opportunity to ridicule the claim that God’s anointed and man’s Savior ended his life on a cross. The idea was crazy. This is well illustrated by a graffito from the second century, discovered on the Palatine Hill in Rome, on the wall of a house considered by some scholars to have been used as a school for imperial pages. It is the first surviving picture of the crucifixion, and is a caricature. A crude drawing depicts, stretched on a cross, a man with the head of a donkey. To the left stands another man, with one arm raised in worship. Un-
evenly scribbled underneath are the words ALEXAMENOS CEBETE (that is, se-bete) THEON, “Alexamenos worships God.” The cartoon is now in the Kircherian Museum in Rome. Whatever the origin of the accusation of donkey-worship (which was attributed to both Jews and Christians), it was the concept of worshiping a crucified man which was being held up to derision.

One detects the same note of scorn in Lucian of Samosata, the second-century pagan satirist. In The Passing of Peregrinus (a fictitious Christian convert whom he portrays as a charlatan) he lampoons Christians as “worshipping that crucified sophist himself and living under his laws.”

THE PERSPECTIVE OF JESUS
The fact that a cross became the Christian symbol, and that Christians stubbornly refused, in spite of the ridicule, to discard it in favor of something less offensive, can have only one explanation. It means that the centrality of the cross originated in the mind of Jesus himself. It was out of loyalty to him that his followers clung so doggedly to this sign. What evidence is there, then, that the cross stood at the center of Jesus’ own perspective?

Our only glimpse into the developing mind of the boy Jesus has been given to us in the story of how at the age of twelve he was taken to Jerusalem at Passover and then left behind by mistake. When his parents found him in the temple, “sitting among the teachers, listening to them and asking them questions,” they scolded him. They had been anxiously searching for him, they said. “Why were you searching for me?” he responded with innocent astonishment. “Didn’t you know I had to be in my Father’s house?” (Lk 2:41-50). Luke tells the story with a tantalizing economy of detail. We must therefore be careful not to read into it more than the narrative itself warrants. This much we may affirm, however: that already at the age of twelve Jesus was both speaking of God as “my Father” and also feeling an inward compulsion to occupy himself with his Father’s affairs. He knew he had a mission. His Father had sent him into the world for a purpose. This mission he must perform; this purpose he must fulfill. What these were emerges gradually in the narrative of the Gospels.

The Evangelists hint that Jesus’ baptism and temptation were both occasions on which he committed himself to go God’s way rather than the devil’s, the way of suffering and death rather than of popularity and acclaim. Yet Mark (who is followed in this by Matthew and Luke) pinpoints a later event when Jesus began to

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