The Sign of Jonah

Introduction

The most recognizable symbol of modern-day Christianity is the cross. In essence, almost every Christian church – and most Christian-based organizations – display crosses on their buildings and in their literature, as part of identifying themselves as Christians. (Note that Catholic organizations often display crucifixes, rather than crosses. A crucifix is a cross which is depicted with the body of Jesus on it.)

Interestingly, the earliest Christians did not use the symbol of the cross at all, to identify themselves as Christians. In fact, the cross did not become widely used by Christians until the early 4th century – during the time of Emperor Constantine.

So, the use of the cross as a symbol of Christianity is yet another example of Christianity changing dramatically, during the first few centuries after the apostles.

Issues with the Cross as a Symbol

There are a number of reasons why the earliest Christians did not use the cross as a symbol of their faith. There are two specific reasons that are of prime importance, however. First of all, the Greek word that is translated as “cross” – stauros – may not actually mean a cross at all! Basically, many scholars have the opinion that stauros actually means a “stake” – i.e., a single, vertical piece of wood – with no cross beam at all. If that theory is correct, then Jesus was executed on a straight, up-and-down stake – rather than on a cross. Of course, if that is true, then there definitely would not be any reason for Christians to use a “cross” symbol at all.

Just for the sake of the argument, though, let’s assume that stauros actually does mean a cross – and that Jesus was executed on a cross. Even if that is true, there is another, even more important reason why Christians would not use the cross as an identifying symbol. The easiest way to explain this reason is with an example. Let’s say that your best friend – and greatest mentor – was murdered by being stabbed with a knife. In that case, would you want to remember your friend by creating a replica of the knife that your friend was stabbed with – and then by displaying that replica in your home? Or, would you want to wear a symbol of that knife as a necklace? No, of course not – you would want to remember your friend, himself, and the good things that he did – i.e., you would not want to remember the weapon by which he was murdered.

Of course, in the case Jesus, it is true that Jesus gave his life for all of us – so that all of us have the opportunity to be saved. However, Jesus himself told us that we should remember him - as opposed to remembering the cross on which he died:

19 And he took bread, and when he had given thanks, he broke it and gave it to them, saying, “This is my body, which is given for you. Do this in remembrance of me.” 20 And likewise the cup after they had eaten, saying, “This cup that is poured out for you is the new covenant in my blood.

In addition, the apostle Paul explicitly stated that the very basis of our faith is the resurrection of Jesus – not the death of Jesus:

1 Corinthians 15:13-14 (ESV):

13 But if there is no resurrection of the dead, then not even Christ has been raised. 14 And if Christ has not been raised, then our preaching is in vain and your faith is in vain.

Of course, the cross is not a symbol of Jesus’ resurrection – just the opposite; it is a symbol of his death. As a result, it is completely obvious why the earliest Christians did not use the cross as a symbol of their faith – it is because the basis of the Christian faith is the resurrection of Jesus!

Other Symbols of Christianity

As mentioned, the earliest Christians did not use the cross as a symbol of their faith. So, that raises an obvious follow-up question: what symbol(s) did the early Christians use? Historical documents and archaeological evidence show us that a number of different symbols were used; some of the more common ones were the anchor, the lyre, and the ship. Needless to say, those symbols are not in use at all in modern-day Christianity.

However, there is one other symbol that was also used by the earliest Christians; that symbol is the fish. Of course, the symbol of the fish is used today as well; for example, fish outlines that have “Jesus” inscribed within them can often be seen on car bumpers.

Given that fact, it is useful to investigate the “meaning” behind the fish symbol. In other words, to determine why the fish was chosen as a symbol of Christianity.

The most common explanation that I have seen, about the meaning of the “fish” symbol, is that it refers to the “loaves and fishes” miracles of Jesus. In other words, the theory is that the fish reminds people of the fact that Jesus miraculously “multiplied” a few small fish (and a few loaves of bread) to feed thousands of hungry people, on two separate occasions – one time to feed 5,000 people, and another time to feed 4,000 people. Two accounts of those two miracles are located in Mark 6:30-44 and Mark 8:1-10.

The loaves and fishes miracles were certainly very “memorable” to the early Christians, of course. In addition, those miracles have some “symbolic” significance – because they point to the fulfillment of some prophesies in the Old Testament. However, as mentioned above, the basis of the Christian faith is the resurrection of Jesus – and as a result, one would expect that the early Christians would use a symbol
that would remind them of the resurrection. The loaves and fishes miracles do not have anything to do with Jesus’ resurrection, of course.

So, let’s investigate further into Scripture, to see what Jesus, himself, stated about the “signs” that he would give to people.

The Sign of Jonah

In several passages of Scripture, Jesus stated that he would only give one “sign” to the people that lived during his generation. In each of those passages, Jesus refers to the sign in question as the “sign of Jonah”.

Of course, Jonah was one of the prophets in the Old Testament. God gave Jonah a very specific task – to warn the people in the city of Nineveh that God was about to destroy them, because of their extremely evil behavior. Jonah did not want to warn Nineveh, however, so he tried to “escape” from God, by getting on a boat headed for Spain. God then caused Jonah to get swallowed by a whale – and Jonah remained “imprisoned” in the whale for three days. After those three days, Jonah cried out to God for help – and God then freed him from the whale.

Here is a very relevant passage from the Book of Jonah, which describes Jonah’s time in the whale:

*Jonah 1:17; 2:1-2,17 (ESV):*

17 And the LORD appointed a great fish to swallow up Jonah. And Jonah was in the belly of the fish three days and three nights.

1 Then Jonah prayed to the LORD his God from the belly of the fish, saying,

“I called out to the LORD, out of my distress, and he answered me; out of the belly of Sheol I cried, and you heard my voice.

10 And the LORD spoke to the fish, and it vomited Jonah out upon the dry land.

There are three very important items to note, about the above passage:

- First, Jonah refers to his imprisonment as being “in the belly of Sheol“. The Hebrew word Sheol refers to the grave – i.e., it is a generic term which refers to death and burial. So, Jonah symbolically refers to his imprisonment in the whale as him being “dead and buried” – and therefore, when God frees Jonah from the whale, that symbolically brings Jonah “back to life”.

Second, note that the time of Jonah’s imprisonment is specified as “three days and three nights”. In other words, Jonah was in the whale for three full days, and three full nights – i.e., 72 hours.

Finally, most people assume that Jonah was imprisoned in a whale. However, the Hebrew word that is used in Jonah does not actually specify a whale – the word in question actually means… a fish!

With all of the above information in mind, take a look at the following passage from Jesus – in which he describes the “sign” that he will give to people:

Matthew 12:38-40 (ESV):

38 Then some of the scribes and Pharisees answered him, saying, “Teacher, we wish to see a sign from you.” 39 But he answered them, “An evil and adulterous generation seeks for a sign, but no sign will be given to it except the sign of the prophet Jonah. 40 For just as Jonah was three days and three nights in the belly of the great fish, so will the Son of Man be three days and three nights in the heart of the earth.

As shown above, Jesus stated that the one and only “sign” that will be given to people is the sign of Jonah. As mentioned, Jonah was symbolically “dead and buried” for three days and three nights – and then God symbolically “resurrected” him. In the above passage, Jesus “links” Jonah’s symbolic death and resurrection with his own, literal death and resurrection.

Of course, Jonah’s imprisonment was in a fish – and as a result, it stands to reason that the early Christians would use the fish symbol, to remind themselves of the death – and resurrection – of Jesus!

Conclusion

Modern-day Christianity uses the cross as the symbol of the Christian faith. However, the earliest Christians did not use the cross at all – and that is not surprising, because the cross is a symbol of Jesus’ death – while the basis of the Christian faith is Jesus’ resurrection.

Not only that, but Jesus himself told us that the one – and only – “sign” that will be given to people is the “sign of Jonah” Of course, Jonah was symbolically “dead and buried” for three days – and he was symbolically “resurrected” after that time. Also, Jonah’s “imprisonment” was in a fish.

The other item to note is that one of the most common symbols that the early Christians did use was the symbol of the fish. As a result, from all of the above information, it certainly appears logical to me that the reason why the fish was used as a Christian symbol is because it refers to the “sign of Jonah” – and that sign, in turn, refers to Jesus’ resurrection!

I hope that this article was useful to you!