

The Cross of Christ

By Jim Fowler, contributing writer

Part 5: The Mystical Application of the Inward Cross

These misunderstandings and misinterpretations reveal a much broader mystical explanation of the cross and the crucifixion of Jesus, which needs to be addressed. There is a long history of Christians using the symbol of the cross in superstitious and mystical ways.

The earliest Christians seem to have repudiated the use of the cross as a symbol. This is because the cross was a despised execution instrument. Would we want to wear a gold-plated noose or gallows had Jesus been hanged, or a gold-plated guillotine had Jesus been beheaded, or a gold-plated electric chair had Jesus been electrocuted, or a gold-plated syringe had Jesus been lethally injected? It is not difficult to understand their aversion to using the cross as a symbol.

Mankind has always utilized symbols to give expression to their abstract ideas. Early Christians developed a symbol of the fish, because the Greek word for fish, *ichthus*, was used as an acrostic for "Jesus Christ, God's Son, Savior." The dove was used as a symbol of the Holy Spirit. The first two letters of the Greek word for Christ, *Christos*, were formed together as a *chi-rho* symbol for Christ. The primary emphasis of early Christian preaching was the resurrection-life of Jesus Christ, for which a symbol was difficult to find. The empty cross became a symbol to show that Jesus had been raised from the dead, and it eventually became the predominant Christian symbol. The first record of its use is found during the second century. Clement of Alexandria wrote, "We mark the brow with the sign of the cross."¹ There is also evidence that the gesture of the cross and material objects in the form of a cross were used as early as the second century as ritual fetishes to ward off evil, a practice which was condemned.

The cross, as a symbol, was further entrenched as the primary symbol of Christian religion after the Roman emperor, Constantine, claimed to have seen a flaming cross of light in the sky with the words, "By this sign conquer" (quoted in the 4th century work - *Ecclesiastical History of Eusebius*). He, henceforth, merged Christian religion with his political aspirations, using the symbol of the cross. Constantine's mother, Helena, is alleged to have travelled to Palestine in AD 325 and claimed to have discovered the original wooden cross on which Jesus was crucified. The criteria for the claim was that a sick person had grasped the wood and was allegedly healed. Small fragments were transported back to Rome and sold to wealthy believers as priceless relics. There were not enough to supply the demand, so they claimed "the miracle of the multiplication of the cross" whereby, many more splinters from the cross were allegedly formed. It is reported that wood fragments existed in Roman Catholic churches around the world sufficient to construct many crosses.

The problem with symbols is that since they are more tangible than the abstract reality, religious people tend gradually to superstitiously worship the symbol and lose sight of the reality on which it is based. This, of course, is the essence of idolatry. Symbols become amulets, magical charms, "holy" hardware. They are used as fetishes - believed to have magical power to aid or protect when rubbed, worn, or otherwise utilized. Symbols can also become conceptual fetishes - mental

objects of irrational reverence and obsessive devotion. A.W. Tozer remarked that idolatry "begins in the mind and may be present where no overt act of worship has taken place."² It is this latter practice of using the cross as an ideological idol that we shall continue to explore.

For many centuries, the ideas of the cross and the action of Christ's crucifixion have been considered as if they were an ongoing living reality. The concept of the cross has been enlivened, empowered, personified, and deified.

Thomas à Kempis, a medieval mystic within the Roman Catholic church, penned these words:

"In the cross is salvation, in the cross is life, in the cross is protection against our enemies, in the cross is infusion of heavenly sweetness, in the cross is strength of mind, in the cross joy of spirit, in the cross the height of virtue, in the cross the perfection of sanctity.

Behold! in the cross all doth consist, and all lieth in our dying thereon; for there is no other way unto life, and unto true inward peace, but the way of the holy cross, and of daily mortification."³

Seventeenth century Catholic mystic, Francois Fenelon, wrote:

"There is nothing good except in the hidden cross. O cross! O good cross! I embrace thee. I adore in thee the dying Jesus, with whom I must die."⁴

"God, who could have saved us without crosses, has not wished to do so."⁵

"We must carry the cross with Christ during this fleeting life. The cross forms us into His image."⁶

Madame Jeanne Guyon, another Catholic mystic of the seventeenth century, adds:

"God gives us the cross, and then the cross gives us God."⁷

A Protestant mystic has written similarly:

"In the Cross is salvation, in the Cross is life, in the Cross is safety from enemies; in the Cross is that peace which the world cannot give; in the Cross is courage, in the Cross is joy; in the Cross is the sum of all virtues, in the Cross the perfection of holiness. There is no salvation for the soul, no hope of eternal life in anything else. The Cross is the beginning and the end; ...there is no other way to life and to real inward peace but the way of the Cross."⁸

How can such blatantly un-Scriptural statements be accepted by Christian people? Salvation is in Jesus Christ alone (1 Thess. 5:9). Jesus Christ is life (John 14:6; Col. 3:4). The "*summing up of all things in Christ*" (Eph. 1:10). Jesus Christ is "*the beginning and the end*" (Rev. 21:6; 22:13), not the cross! To equate the conceptual idea of the cross with Jesus Christ is idolatry!

But the mystic writers go on to make such outlandish statements as:

"There is nothing in the universe more divine than the cross. ...Let us learn to look at the cross as the most divine of all that is divine in Christ."⁹

"The cross is the highest revelation of the divine life." ¹⁰

"Begin with the cross; come and bow." ¹¹

"We bow in repentance at His Cross." ¹²

The cross is not to be considered as "divine" or to be "bowed" to even as a conceptual idol. Some authors equate what they call "the Spirit of the Cross" ¹³ or the "crucifixion Spirit" ¹⁴ with the Holy Spirit (the Spirit of Christ), indicating that "the cross and the Spirit are equally the power of God" for there is an "intimate union between the cross and the Spirit." ¹⁵

Many of the mystic writers keep referring to "the power of the Cross," whereas the Scriptures refer to "*the power of God*" (Rom. 1:16; 1 Cor. 1:18, 24), "*the power of the Lord Jesus*" (1 Cor. 5:4; c.f. 2 Cor. 12:9), "*the power of the Holy Spirit*" (Rom. 15:13), and "*the power of His resurrection*" (Phil. 3:10), but never to "the power of the Cross. They have empowered the idea of the cross as "a force in the life of a Christ," ¹⁶ as "the manifestation of an activity of God in Christ." ¹⁷

"God provided us with a power by which every obstacle may be taken away. That power is the death of Christ. To get the benefit of that power we must submit to be conformed to that death... ..in that death also we possess the power that separates us from the self-life and keeps us in a condition of deliverance." ¹⁸

"All the power generated at Calvary is at your disposal." ¹⁹

"The Christian must learn the dynamic of the Cross as it applies to the believer." ²⁰

Notice in these quotations how they capitalize the word "Cross" and "Calvary," just as they do "God" and "Christ," because they have deified the concept of the cross.

Is there more than one cross? Does the action of Christ's crucifixion on the cross need to be repeated? Most definitely not, for it is clearly stated that Christ died "*once for all*" (Heb. 7:27; 9:28; 10:10; 1 Peter 3:18). Yet one author writes,

"Shame on me if I think there is a Cross for Jesus, but none for me." ²¹

Several writers indicate that Christ's crucifixion was to serve as an exemplary model for subsequent Christian activity:

"The Cross is not only atoning; it is also exemplary." ²²

"God conceived the sublime object-lesson of Calvary...that we might choose to stand with God." ²³

"His death was...the indispensable achievement incident to the engendering of a crucified church. A crucified Christ that He might have crucified followers." ²⁴

"Calvary is God's sublime master model for us all. It carries the law of life for all of us." ²⁵

"The Saviour pictures...a procession, He Himself taking the lead with His Cross. He is the chief Crucian. All His true disciples follow in this procession." ²⁶

Contrary to the biblical evidence of the completed and "finished work" of Jesus Christ, the writers who are being cited believe that there is an ongoing continuous process of subjectively applying the crucifixion of Jesus within the Christian life.

"As the Holy Spirit applies the Cross within...we realize daily crucifixion of self." ²⁷

"The Cross in its daily application keeps the flesh experimentally in the place of death..." ²⁸

"The essence of His Cross...we have to carry about within us always, as an abiding condition of mind, since we need a constant and maintained separation from our old self-life. This is not a matter effected once for all. To be brought into oneness with that death, to be so identified with it that we...always carry it about, is to be walking in a condition of continual deliverance from the self-life." ²⁹

"The subjective working of the Cross is a continuous process." ³⁰

"The believer never gets beyond the need of a constant appropriation of the efficacy of Christ's sacrifice...as the way out of this loathsome thing we call "Self." ³¹

In order to make such comments, these authors must deny the "aorist tense" and "perfect tense" verbs that Paul uses to explain the crucifixion of Jesus and our spiritual identification with Him. Convenient to their own unbiblical thesis, they arbitrarily change the verbs to the "present tense imperative" to signify continuing action and responsibility. If they do accept the completed action of Christ's death, they sometimes redefine "death" and "crucifixion" in very unique ways.

"The flesh has been crucified...though not yet dead." ³²

"Crucifixion is not death; but it is unto death." ³³

"Death is simply a cessation from struggling." ³⁴

Underlying all of these admonitions to "take up the cross" and "die to self" is the failure to understand the "finished work" of Christ, and the grace operation of God to manage the "perfecting" of our Christian lives (Phil. 1:6; 2:13). They have indicated that we are perfected by our application of the cross:

"Our spiritual life is perfected by the constant recognition of the cross and by our unceasing application of it to all our life and being." ³⁵

What is being advocated is a "works" theology of sanctification. The Christian is advised to respond and act by following Christ's example of crucifixion, so that God can act in his/her life. This makes God's activity contingent on my activity; God dependent on man! Never!

One writer demotes God to having to act on the same "principle" of self-sacrifice that man is alleged to have to follow:

"Self-sacrifice is the foundation upon which the universe is built, the law by which it operates. If sacrifice were not the supreme law of the universe, would God, the supreme ruler of the universe, operate on that principle?" ³⁶

God does not act on any "principle." He acts as God, independent of anything outside of Himself.

Others blatantly state that God's activity in the Christian's life is contingent on the Christian's response of self-crucifixion.

"God, upon transmitting His life to us, then requires us to experience co-death with Christ so that His life may be resurrected in us." ³⁷

"The Beloved cannot bring us to union with Himself without a deep participation in His cross." ³⁸

"As we remain within the crucifying influence of the Cross, we are freed to abide in the life-giving influence of the Resurrection One." ³⁹

"The self-life must be wholly taken away to make room for the life of God. My life must be expelled; then the Spirit of Jesus will flow in." ⁴⁰

The consequences promised when a Christian responds with what they refer to as "faith in the cross" ⁴¹ and "commits to death" ⁴² are but a listing of what every believer *already has* "in Christ Jesus."

It is boldly asserted that "the Cross of Christ saves," ⁴³ despite the fact that the name of Jesus means "Jehovah saves" (Matthew 1:21) and there is "*no other name under heaven, by which we must be saved*" (Acts 4:12). The experience of the cross is said to "bring a personal salvation." ⁴⁴

It is insinuated that full redemption is only effected when we are willing to die with Jesus.

"The church...has been enjoying a fifty-percent redemption because she has not realized the implications of the cross. She has not been willing to die with her Lord." ⁴⁵

Scripture indicates that "*we have redemption*" (Eph. 1:7; Col. 1:14), and it is a completed "*eternal redemption*" (Heb. 9:12).

Jesus Christ is the basis of all spiritual life (John 14:6), and it is His life that we receive in regeneration. How then can it be asserted that "The Cross of Christ...contains all the elements of moral regeneration and of spiritual life."? ⁴⁶

Contrary to the Scriptures wherein it is written, "*If anyone is in Christ, he is a new creature...*" (2 Cor. 5:17), one author states that we must:

"Be willing to embrace the Cross in its fullest and deepest meaning and there die to sin, to self, to the world, and to the devil, and so be raised up a new creature in Christ Jesus." ⁴⁷

John and Peter, respectively, report that all Christians are part of the "kingdom, priests unto God" (Rev. 1:6), a "*royal priesthood*" (1 Peter 2:9). In contradiction to this truth the mystic writer asserts:

"The way of the Cross is the Royal way, and they who tread it are kings and priests unto God." ⁴⁸

Whereas, Paul explains that every Christian has "*citizenship in heaven*" (Phil. 3:20), those who emphasize the continuing experience of the cross indicate that such makes us "citizens of heaven." ⁴⁹

Despite Paul's statement that "*God has blessed us with every spiritual blessing in the heavenly places in Christ*" (Eph. 1:3), one author claims:

"The whole church has to bear the mark of the crucifixion spirit...through whom the Lord will dispense his richest blessings." ⁵⁰

"Death to sin, death to the world, death to self are regarded as the path of life and blessing to the soul." ⁵¹

"Christ dying the death of the cross that I may die with him unto sin...two blessed truths through which we enter into the full blessing of the cross of Christ." ⁵²

Freedom is ours because of Christ and His "finished work." Jesus said, "*You shall know the truth, and the truth shall make you free*" (John 8:32, NKJV). Paul explains, "*It was for freedom that Christ set us free...do not be subject again to a yoke of slavery*" (Gal. 5:1).

Some writers would put Christians under just such a "yoke of slavery" by insisting that the continuous experience of "the Cross...is the pathway to freedom" ⁵³

"You must take your stand with Christ on Calvary ground. This done, the Holy Spirit will...set you free, and keep you free." ⁵⁴

One author asserts,

"The spirit of the cross is the mark of my discipleship." ⁵⁵

Instead, Jesus said, "*all men will know that you are My disciples, if you have love for one another*" (John 13:35).

The same author later writes,

"Death to sin and self is what is needed to make love in us the spontaneous and joyful outflow of a new nature. The intimate fellowship of that death enables us to love. The cross, received into the heart, inspires us with love." ⁵⁶

Paul, on the other hand, wrote that "*the love of God has been poured out within our hearts through the Holy Spirit who was given to us*" (Rom. 5:5), and the "*fruit of the Spirit is love...*" (Gal. 5:22).

Another author thinks that on-going crucifixion is the basis of fruitfulness:

"The Cross invites us to boundless fruitfulness." ⁵⁷

"A divine dying...will bring the church again to...a fruitfulness comparable to that of primitive Christians." ⁵⁸

Paul wrote to the Ephesians about being "*filled with the Spirit*" (Eph. 5:18) and the practical consequences thereof. The mystical writers indicate that self-crucifixion is the contingency upon which fullness of the Spirit is based:

"The Cross leads to the fullness of the Spirit. As we yield to the Holy Spirit...crucified with Christ...the Spirit in his fullness will come and possess us." ⁵⁹

"Without the cross having full mastery of our life there is no fullness of the Spirit." ⁶⁰

"There is given through it (the cross) the fullness and the power of the Spirit." ⁶¹

The character expressed in the behavior of a Christian is to be a manifestation of the Holy character of God (1 Peter 1:15-16). Such expression of holiness is not predicated on our experiencing crucifixion, as the misguided crucifixion advocates propound:

"The crucifixion of the flesh...maintained daily in the power of the Holy Spirit, is essential to a holy life." ⁶²

"The Cross of Christ not only enforces holiness, but makes holiness possible." ⁶³

"The only way onto the Highway (of holiness) is up a small, dark, forbidding hill--the Hill of Calvary." ⁶⁴

Christ Jesus "*abolished death and brought life and immortality to light through the gospel*," explained Paul to Timothy (2 Tim. 1:10). When then is it adversely explained that the continuing experience of "the cross...gives to us the right to the resurrection and the life immortal." ⁶⁵

If Christians are "*partakers of a heavenly calling*" (Heb. 3:1) and have "*an inheritance...reserved in heaven*" (1 Peter 1:4), why then do these advocates of continued performance encourage us to additional crucifixion in order to go to heaven?

"Let a man look at himself as nailed to the Cross..., and calmly, quietly, take the path of the Cross, and he will follow the Lamb not only to Calvary, but right to the centre of heaven, and share His Throne." ⁶⁶

The list of contradictions with Scripture could go on and on. The mystic writers have spiritualized the cross and personified the cross as acting with divine power. They claim that it is able to "cleanse the flesh" ⁶⁷ and "purify" ⁶⁸, that the cross will "put the ax to the tree of self" ⁶⁹ with a "sharp edge" ⁷⁰ that will "sever us from the old life" ⁷¹ and "tear us ruthlessly from everything else...sundering the dearest of earthly ties." ⁷² The cross is likened to a "searchlight, which will discover the plague of our hearts" ⁷³ and a "hidden fire of radium in our bones" ⁷⁴ "for the removal of all the cancers of the 'self-life.'" ⁷⁵ There is no Scriptural basis for any such claims.

The claims of a divinized action of a deified cross become even more damnable when they so obviously supplant Jesus Christ as the primary focus of the gospel:

"The Cross of Christ is the supreme objective of the entire body of divine revelation." ⁷⁶

"The Cross is the supreme attraction." ⁷⁷

"The message of Calvary must be the most sacred theme to God the Father." ⁷⁸

"The Cross of Christ...even in Heaven it stands forth with such splendour as to eclipse all else." ⁷⁹

"The Cross of Christ is to become (the Christian's) life, his all in all." ⁸⁰

"The Christian in his earthly pilgrimage will never get beyond the cross. ...The Cross is his highest glory even as it was for his Savior." ⁸¹

These foregoing comments are nothing less than an abominable replacement of the Lord and Savior, Jesus Christ, with an idealized and idolatrous concept of the cross. They must be regarded as false-teaching and repudiated as contrary to the gospel (Gal. 1:6-10) by every Bible-believing Christian.

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