

The Cross of Christ (part four)

By Jim Fowler, contributing writer

The Behavioral Choice of Taking up a Cross

Now we return to the five references within the synoptic gospels where Jesus spoke of "taking up," "bearing," or "carrying" a cross (Matt. 10:38; 16:24; Mark 8:34; Luke 9:23; 14:27). We have noted that the first century Jews of Palestine were well acquainted with death by crucifixion on crosses, so there is no anachronism in Jesus' prior comments about a "cross" unless we are reading into those comments reference to Jesus' own experience of crucifixion, which was yet to transpire. There is no doubt that the death of Jesus Christ on a cross was *"foreknown before the foundation of the world"* (1 Peter 1:20; cf. Rev. 13:8). But it occurred historically in the first century, and that historical crucifixion was subsequent to the three occasions when Jesus spoke generally of "taking up a cross."

The question we must ask is whether there is any reason to believe that Jesus intended those who heard His teaching on those occasions to postulate His own post-dated experience of crucifixion for the interpretation and meaning of His words. This is unreasonable and unnecessary and does indeed create an anachronism. We must not project our perspective of Christ's crucifixion back upon the previous words of Jesus.

On three different occasions, Jesus made general metaphorical comments about the familiar action of bearing a cross unto crucifixion. The object of a cross, to which He refers, does not have any reference to the particular cross that stood on Golgotha; nor to the historical event of Christ's crucifixion; nor to any theological or spiritual implications thereof. Jesus makes a generic and figurative reference to "a cross," to the action of cross-bearing; *not* to the specific cross on which Christ was crucified, nor to His crucifixion.

Each record of Jesus' comments refers to the follower of Jesus taking up "his cross." It is grammatically impossible to construe this to mean "His cross," referring to the cross of Jesus. Many authors have misunderstood this point and have encouraged Christians through the centuries to:

"Bear manfully the cross of Thy Lord" ¹

The Christian "must bear his own cross" -- i.e. the Cross of Jesus as it affects his own life -- and follow the Lord in His path of the Cross. ²

"His cross is mine. I consent to share His Cross." ³

"The Christian in his earthly pilgrimage will never get beyond the cross. To the end he must bear His Redeemer's cross." ⁴

"His cross becomes our cross..." ⁵

"...His Cross...we have to carry it about within us always." ⁶

"To the church...has been committed the sacred trust of lifting up His cross in the world...bearing and living it." ⁷

There is no biblical basis for such comments. They denigrate the "finished work" of Jesus Christ.

When Jesus said, *"If any man will to come after Me, let him deny himself, and take up his cross daily, and follow Me"* (Luke 9:23, KJV), He was referring to a cross as a well-known instrument of death, an execution device. He was alluding to the activity of taking up a cross and carrying it to one's own crucifixion, which was a daily occurrence in that day. The imperative form of the verb *"take up"* implies a definite personal responsibility on the part of the one who would be His follower. Obviously, Jesus is not asking for a literal, physical response of taking up the timber of a material cross. What He says must be taken figuratively. Jesus demands that those who follow Him voluntarily allow a metaphorical death instrument to be applied to their selfish tendencies, in order to: execute, terminate, bring to an end, allow for the absence of selfish behavioral expressions. This must be done continuously, "daily," in the midst of every situation we confront.

Jesus was employing a common Hebraistic technique of repetition. Having just commanded that His followers "deny themselves," He uses a parallel phrase with a synonymous concept to reinforce His meaning. In "denying ourselves," we voluntarily choose to disallow the behavioral expressions of personal interest and selfishness. In "taking up a cross," we voluntarily choose to allow for the termination, cessation, and absence of these same behavioral expressions of selfishness.

Many different interpretations have been proffered for the meaning of Jesus' admonition to "take up one's cross daily." Some have suggested Jesus was encouraging a willingness for self-sacrifice or self-surrender; or a willingness for suffering; or a willingness to be humiliated, shamed, or reproached; or a willingness for martyrdom. The interpretation best suited to the context is to accept the Hebraic parallelism with the preceding phrase and understand His command for a willingness to allow for the end, the termination, the cessation of selfish behavioral expressions - a choice we must make day-by-day, moment-by-moment.

The next question we must ask is whether this commanded action constitutes a call for the Christian to "die to self." "Dying to self," "crucifying self," "putting self to death," "mortifying self," etc. are all non-biblical phrases, which are commonly used in the terminology of some religious teachers and writers. If, by the phrase "dying to self," they simply meant a choice synonymous with "denying oneself," then the phrase might have legitimate usage. But the phrase is often freighted with other meanings and inculcations to additional responsibilities. Those who use this phrase are often ambiguous as to what "self" they are encouraging others to "die to." Is it the "self" of personal spiritual identity? Such an action would be apostasy. Is it the "self" of personal individuality? Such an action would be akin to the nihilism of Buddhism. Is it the "self" of personal embodiment? Such an action would be suicide. Is it the "self" of personal resource? Such is to posit the fallacious tenet of humanistic self-potential. Is it the "self" of personal interest and selfishness? This can be the only legitimate usage, making the phrase equivalent to "denying oneself."

Many of the Scriptures used to justify the use of the phrase "dying to self" refer to Paul's own physical persecution and suffering, not to any ongoing expected action within the Christian life.

When Paul says, "*I die daily*" (1 Cor. 15:31); "*we are being put to death all day long*" (Romans 8:36); "*we are constantly being delivered over to death for Jesus' sake*" (2 Cor. 4:11); and when he expresses his desire to know "*the fellowship of His suffering, being conformed to His death*" (Phil. 3:10), the context always indicates that Paul is being physically persecuted. His personal embodiment is being beaten and battered unto death, but he is quite willing to suffer thus for Jesus' sake.

The phrase "dying to self" is often used to encourage masochistic "works" of continued performance in order to live the Christian life. When it is thus used as a call to self-effort, and when it is implied that Christ's activity in and through the Christian is contingent upon this action of the Christian, then those who teach this have effectively denied the "finished work" of Jesus Christ. Others advocate "dying to self" simply as the renunciation of the "straw-man" of humanistic self-potential -- an exercise in irrelevancy.

¹ Thomas a Kempis. *Of the Imitation of Christ*. New York: Thomas Y. Crowell, n.d., pg. 64.

² Penn-Lewis, Jessie. *The Cross of Calvary and Its Message*. Poole, Dorset, England: The Overcomer Literature Trust, n.d., pg. 99.

³ Penn-Lewis, Jessie. *Ibid.* pg. 41

⁴ Huegel, F.J. *Reigning With Christ*. Minneapolis: Dimension Books, 1963. pg. 86.

⁵ Hopkins, Evan. *The Law of Liberty in the Spiritual Life*. Fort Washington: Christian Literature Crusade, 1974. pg. 82.

⁶ Stanford, Miles J. *Principles of Spiritual Growth*. Lincoln: Back to the Bible, 1972. pg. 77.

⁷ Murray, Andrew. *The Cross of Christ*. London: Pickering and Inglis, Ltd., 1989. pg. 33.

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