
ΙΧΘΥΣ

In the first century the cross was a dreaded symbol of death. Nothing positive was associated with the cross. It was the cruel tool of crucifixion used by the Romans to inflict an agonizing death upon thieves, murders, insurrectionists, etc. Since the second century onward, the cross has been transformed into a symbol not of torturous death, but the hope of renewed life, through the blood of Christ which washes away sin and victory over death.

Yet, the cross was not the only symbol used by the early Christians as a universal symbol of their faith. The simple outline of a fish was commonly used by Christians. It was used as a means of identifying one another.

In the first four centuries of Christianity the saints were at times under severe persecution by the Romans. The symbol of a fish was used as both a secret code and as anti-Roman symbols by those who were persecuted. Why a fish? Because the Greek word for fish, ichthus (pronounce IK-THUS) served as an acrostic. An acrostic is an "arrangement of words in which the first letter of each line ordinarily combines with others to form a word or words or the alphabet." Each Greek letter in ichthus stands for the first letters of the Greek words meaning "Jesus Christ, Son of God, Savior". For example,

Iesous means "Jesus"
CHristos means "Christ"
THEou means of "God"
Uiou means "the "Son"
Soter means "the Savior"

Since there were times during this period that

Christianity was an illegal religion, the disciples used the sign of a fish to identify each other in an undercover fashion. Just as a modern company uses IBM to stand for International Business Machines or the U.S. Postal Service uses ZIP to stand for "Zone Improvement Program," those early believers knew what "ichthus" signified.

Two Christians might meet in the open market. They did not know whether or not each other were indeed Christians. So one takes his heel or the toe of his sandal and draws an arc in the earth. If the other person is a believer they will make an arc with their foot starting at one point of the other's arc and bisecting the other end with their arc. The result would be a drawing that resembled a fish.

Not only was the fish symbol used in this fashion, but the ichthus drawing was a common motif in the art of early Christians scratched on the walls of ancient Roman catacombs where persecuted Christians would meet to worship. It has been discovered as graffiti on ancient walls. So common did the use of the ichthus become that early Christians were also referred to as "pisciculi." The root of this Latin word means "fish." There is a literary reference made to the fish by Clement of Alexandria, born around 150 AD, that recommended his readers to have their seals engraved with a dove or a fish. The fish was used to symbolize baptism by being represented on ancient baptistries. Tertullian referred to believers in this way, "we, little fishes, after the image of our Ichthus, Jesus Christ, are born in the water." Others used the ichthus to represent the loaves and fishes and Jesus' own declaration to the disciples to become "fishers of men" (Matthew 4:19).

Although not necessarily associated with the fish symbol, the Catholic church used the fish as a symbol in their religion. They did not use it as an acrostic, but an adaptation of paganism. The pagan goddess, Aphrodite Salacia, was worshiped by her followers on her sacred day, Friday. They ate fish and engaged in orgies. From her name comes the English word

"salacious" which means lustful or obscene. The Catholics sought to Christianize this by requiring Catholics to eat fish on Friday - a tradition that was only recently abandoned. It is also reported that "The fish headdress of the priests of Ea [a Sumero-Semitic God] later became the miter of the Christian bishops."

The modern use of the ichthus symbol is seen attached to the back of cars, worn as jewelry, etc. Promoters of the theory of evolution mimic the Christian fish symbol with one of their own. It usually has "DARWIN" in the body of the fish, and little legs underneath. Then there is the "Evolve Fish" (a fish with "EVOLVE" on its body and a wrench in one of its forepaws). This has sparked what some critics have referred to as the "fish wars." Christians have countered with a "Shark Fish" to eat up the others.

Although we do not need a symbol like the ichthus in a society that does not persecute Christians the way they did in the first centuries we do know that fish played a major role in the Gospels. Christ told his disciples "Come after Me, and I will make you become fishers of men" (Mark 1:17). No doubt there are many aspects of fishing for fish that can be compared to fishing for men. Both need to have faith, patience, be selective, be persistent, be courageous, be alert and take care of their catch. The good news is that it is never out of season to fish for souls with



the Good News and there is no limit to how many you bring to Christ.

Jesus also made reference to fish and God willing to answer the prayers of His children by giving them the good things for which they

have asked, "Or if he asks for a fish, will he give him a serpent?" (Matt. 7:10).

The resurrection of Christ was compared to Jonah emerging from the belly of the great fish. "...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." (Matt. 12:40).

Furthermore, there were several miracles of Jesus that involved fish. In the feeding of the five thousand Christ used five loaves and two fish (Matt. 14:17). Twice Jesus told His disciples to let down their nets so they could catch a great many fish even though a whole night of fishing was unproductive (Luke 5:2-6; John 21:6-8).

In reference to Matthew 17:24-27, the early Christian writer Origen commented, "This coin was not in the house of Jesus. Rather, it was in the sea, in the mouth of a fish of the sea. In my opinion, the fish was benefitted when it came up and was caught in the net of Peter, who became a fisher of men. For in that net was that which is figuratively called a fish."

Even after Christ resurrection fish are playing a roll in the Gospel message. According to the Gospel of John Jesus broiled fish for His apostles on the shore of Lake Tiberias. Also the disciples gave that resurrected Savior "a piece of a broiled fish and some honeycomb" to eat (Luke 24:42). This in effect proved that He not a ghost or a hallucination but a resurrected body. With the multitude of references to fish in the Gospel it is no wonder that the early Christians used ichthus as a symbol of their faith.

Now, the next time you see the ichthus symbol on the back of a car or hanging around someone's neck you will know the rest of the story. Yes there was something fishy about those early Christians.

Your are Invited to attend the

Forum Terrace Church of Christ

which meets at

**2446 Arkansas Lane
Grand Prairie, Texas 75052**

Phone: **972.641.4351**

Internet: **www.fourmterrace.com**

Service Times

Sunday

Bible Study.....9:30 am

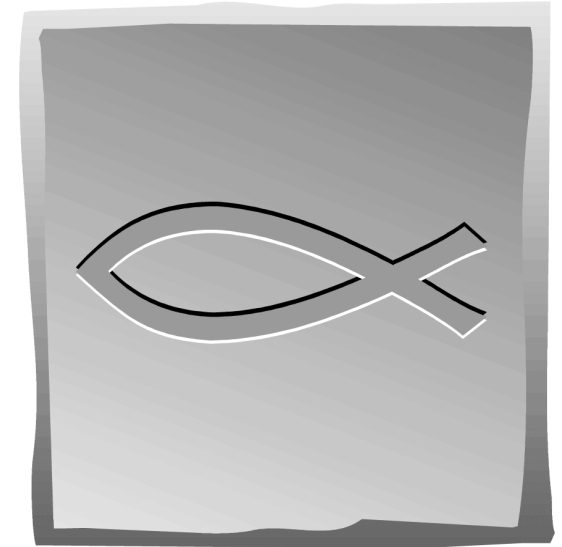
Worship Service.....10:30 am

Worship Service.....5:00 pm

Wednesday

Bible Study.....7:30 pm

ICHTHUS



**Is There Something Fishy
about Christianity?**

by Daniel R. Vess