

The following excerpt is from John Stott's *The Cross of Christ*.

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?<sup>1</sup>

The point here is that the Cross of Christ is the symbol of Christianity. And it has been so from very early in the life of the Church. Again from Stott's work:

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].

Still today, we Christians mark our churches, our homes, our jewelry, and ourselves with the cross. It is simultaneously a symbol of death and of life. It is a symbol of shame and honor. It is a symbol of defeat and victory. It is the ultimate cosmic irony that the most abhorred and contemptible symbol in history has become for us the eternally divine and glorious, sign of God. In it the goodness of God has completely reversed the twisted depravity and rebellion of the world. The story of humanity pivots upon the Cross of Jesus Christ.

- Humanity's past was dominated by alienation from God. We were completely lost and in need of a Savior. The Jews were granted the first glimpses of the holiness of God and were to learn that the only way to restored fellowship with Him was through His mercy. All of this pointed to the cross which was the very mercy of God for humanity. Even today, we measure time relative to the cross of Christ for that event changed the nature of humanity.
- Humanity's present is characterized by God long-suffering. How long will we rebel when Christ has provided all that we need for salvation and life? Certainly we are thankful for those of us who have bowed before the cross and who see in it peace and joy. But so many more hold it in contempt. Lord have mercy upon us!
- Humanity's future is marked by the hope of the cross. Yes, tonight we contemplate the sufferings of Christ on behalf of His creatures, but the death of Christ on the cross never stands alone. Even though the Resurrection is tonight in the background, it is always there for the Resurrection is our promise that we too will be made fully whole. In the cross of Christ, humanity's destiny is realized.

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<sup>1</sup> Stott, J. R. W. (2006). *The Cross of Christ* (pp. 24–25). Downers Grove, IL: IVP Books.

But let us personalize this, for humanity is not merely a collective. It is comprised of individual image-bearers of the divine.

- Your past. At one time each of us was far off from God, but through the cross of Christ, we have been brought near, we have been saved.
- Your present. Work out this salvation wrought for you on the cross in fear and trembling. For it is God that is working in you to bring you to perfection, and the cross of Christ is therefore our joy.
- Your future. Know that you are redeemed now in spirit. But the curse of our rebellion will have its say in this world. However, through the cross of Jesus, each one of us will be made whole in soul and in body. What will that joy be like? All of the fears and shame against which we struggle will be removed. It is because of the cross that we are assured of our glorious future.

The only real question for us tonight is, How deep will you go into the cross? How completely will you bind yourself to the Savior who died upon it, in your place? In your place. You and I can only know true life through the agonizing death of Jesus Christ on the cross. It is by His Blood, shed for us on that instrument of torture, that we are washed clean of our sins. It is by His Body, broken and spent, hanging limp and lifeless, that our lives are made new and that our bodies will be glorified.

So how deep will you go into the cross? Will you leave here tonight thinking that the service was moving and powerful, but then continue on tomorrow just as if it were any other day? Or will you actually be moved to restructure your life so that Jesus becomes the center? So that the Cross would be your rising up in the morning and your motivation in the midday and your rest at night? This is what we are called to do.

Yes, I know that life is hectic. I know it is hard to make ends meet. There is not enough time to do all that we need to do. I know there are things we want to do, and places we want to see. But I will tell you that none of these things are that important if they cost you eternity. Jesus is more important than your agenda. Jesus is more important than your bucket list. Jesus is the most important.

Our service tonight is not meant to be merely emotionally moving. It is meant to be a splash of ice water in our faces. To shake us from our complacency. It hopefully allows us again to strip away the superficial so that we may be able to receive the eternal, and then to hold on to the eternal until the end: until we become the reality of the eternal.

Jesus suffered and died for our sins on the cross. By faith we receive Him. By baptism we are made one with Him. By the sacrament we are confirmed in our faith and strengthened for life's journey. It is all of Jesus, and it is all symbolized by the cross.

Let us therefore hold tightly to the cross. Let our grasp upon it grow stronger and stronger as the days go by. God grant us the grace of Christ not to leave here unchanged in heart and constant in old habits, but rather that our hearts would be softened, and that we would commit to fresh discipline that would draw us further into the outstretched arms of Him who died upon that cross for us.

Amen.