

Why Oakwood Does Not Regularly Display A Cross

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Doctrinal Conviction of Pastor-Teacher Paul B. Phair and Elder Team Policy

Occasionally people ask me why we do not regularly display a cross on the platform in our Worship Center. I now communicate the values and convictions behind why we choose not to do so regularly (we do occasionally). Hopefully, every Christian who weekly worships at Oakwood will agree that this is a *preferential issue* and *not an essential issue* to worship that honors our Lord. I ask all Oakwoodians to graciously accept and non-contentiously yield to the long-standing position of our elders and me. I am not contending that all Christian churches ought to adapt our practice, or that all who display a cross are unduly revering it. However, I hope it will be illuminating as to why Oakwood chooses not to regularly display a cross.

When Oakwood began, we met in rental facilities that included the lunchroom of two different High Schools. We never chose not to have a cross, we just didn't need one. When we built the worship center on Casey Road, we had in mind several values:

- ♥ We designed it to be a multi-purpose facility. We chose not to call it a *sanctuary* with a cross, because we were concerned that it would limit the activities that we might otherwise do

within it – such as karaoke and line dancing.

- ♥ We also chose not to design a facility that looked “religious” – we didn't want ritualistic religion; instead we desire to worship without religious trappings.
- ♥ We wanted our facility to be inviting, rather than imposing or intimidating to the unconvinced people in our community we were striving to reach. It is not accurate to think that Oakwood's leaders don't want a cross because they are concerned about offending non-Christians. What we don't want are unnecessary barriers to people listening and then responding to the gospel. We have never shrunk away from communicating the entire truth of the gospel, and we never will. The Bible says, the *message* of the cross is a hindrance to some – that is core to the true message of our faith and we will not compromise that in any way.

I have recently become aware that the visual symbol of the Christian cross is a hindrance to many Jewish people. I am not speaking of the *message* of the cross, for that is a necessary, unavoidable “stumbling block” to many. I am referring to the *symbol* of

symbol of the cross, because many Jews often associate the symbol of the cross with their persecution by Christians throughout history. Avram Yehoshua (www.seedofabraham.net) has expressed this concern well when he writes:

Christians are to be an instrument of God's reconciliation and mercy to the Jewish People (Rom. 9-12:2). The Apostle Paul speaks of this priority when he declares: *'For I am not ashamed of the gospel, for it is the power of God for salvation to everyone who believes, to the Jew first and also to the Greek.'* (Rom. 1:16)

The most offensive symbol to a Jew is the cross. Not because Jesus died on 'it' but because more Jews have been murdered in the shadow of the cross than all other symbols combined.³⁸ When a well meaning Christian wears a cross in the presence of a Jew, are they being sensitive to that Jewish person? The Apostle Paul says in Romans: *'For if because of food your brother is hurt, you are no longer walking according to love. Do not destroy with your food him for whom Christ died.'* (Rom. 14:15) *'It is good not to eat meat or to drink wine, or to do anything by which your brother stumbles.'* (Rom. 14:21)

If the Apostle was that adamant in relation to meat and drink, how much more would he have been to being sensitive to the Jewish People, that he was ready to die for?³⁹

The 'cross' is a major stumbling block to reaching the Jewish people. Most Christians who display the cross aren't aware of this side of the history of the Church, in relation to the Jewish people, but are walking in something that they believe truly represents their Savior. To possess the genuine faith of the Apostles, we must strive to understand the Lord Yeshua and the Scriptures as they did. As we walk with Him, we will come to know the Truth and the Truth will set us free

(John 8:31-32). Glory be to the God of Israel!

38. For a documented account of Christianity's relationship to the Jewish people over the last 1800 years, and how the cross has come to mean death to the Jewish people, one only need open any paperback history of the Jews, and read from the time of Jesus. I suggest Max Dimont's, *God, Jews and History*.

39. Paul says in Rom 9:1-3: *'I say the truth in Christ, I lie not, my conscience also bearing me witness in the Holy Spirit, that I have great heaviness and continual sorrow in my heart. For I could wish that myself were accursed from Christ for my brethren, my kinsmen according to the flesh'*.

♥ Finally, as we built our Worship Center, we wanted to avoid the potential of perverting the purity of our worship by viewing a cross with reverence, as a necessary aid to worship, or even as an object of worship. I elaborate on this below.

Nowhere in the Bible does God command us to display the symbol of the cross. Furthermore, nowhere in Scripture do we find believers using the cross as a symbol to aid them in worship. The new church that began in Jerusalem met regularly in the Temple for the worship of the Triune God – no cross there! And when they met in homes for worship, there is no evidence that they displayed crosses there either. The use of displaying a cross as a Christian symbol did not come into prevalence until at least a hundred years and likely more after the birth of the church.

According to Jesus, true worship is not dependent upon a particular location or other secondary issues such as forms, symbols, or architectural styles of buildings for worship use – it is about the disposition of the mind & heart in worship of the Lord. Jesus says that worship is to be offered “in spirit and in truth”. It is not the *symbol* that we are commanded to display, but it is the *message* of the cross that we are commissioned to proclaim. When Paul exclaimed, “As for me, may I never boast about anything except the cross of our Lord Jesus Christ”... (Gal 6:14), he uttered a precious truth. Paul exalts the saving work of Christ without any reference to a visual symbol of the cross.

For many, but fortunately not all, the regular display of the cross as an aid to worship, has perverted the worship of the invisible, majestic God, into a focus upon an human made object that is revered and regarded with ritualistic powers, and even worshiped. This is a violation of God’s second commandment. In the spirit of Hezekiah (who destroyed the symbol of the bronze snake upon a stake) those who have revered the symbol of the cross, ought to turn away their focus upon it. For them, it is not an aid, it is an idol.

No object is to be revered, no object is to become necessary or even an important aid to worship. Baptism and the Lord’s Supper are the only two visible symbols that Jesus prescribed as aids to the proclamation and worship for the believer (1 Cor 11:26 NASB “For as often as you eat this bread and drink the cup, you proclaim the Lord’s death until He comes).

For those to whom the symbol of the cross is only a precious symbol (which it can be), I ask, “Is it an essential symbol? Is it important for worship?” I firmly believe it is not. If it is essential or important for a person, then that person has an emotional attachment to it that is spiritually unhealthy and the cross becomes a hindrance to worshipping the majestic, invisible God who is to be worshipped in spirit and in truth.

I believe principles derived from God’s second commandment are applicable to the regular use of the symbol of the cross as an important (or necessary) aid to worship. I refer you to my notes below from a message I delivered on the second commandment. I also have additional rationale there as to why Oakwood does not choose to regularly display the symbol of the cross.

Worship God As He Really Is

Commandment #2 from God's Top Ten List

Exodus 20:4 (& Deut. 5)

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Hook

Exodus 20:4-6

"Do not make idols of any kind, whether in the shape of birds or animals or fish. You must never worship or bow down to them, for I, the Lord your God, am a jealous God who will not share your affection with any other god! I do not leave unpunished the sins of those who hate me, but I punish the children for the sins of their parents to the third and fourth generations. But I lavish my love on those who love me and obey my commands, even for a thousand generations.

What could a commandment on the making of idols possibly have to do with me? I flunked shop class for goodness sake -- and even if I was skilled in craftsmanship, I'm not even tempted to make an object to worship?

This commandment was written against the backdrop of a culture in which idol making and idol worship was a significant part of everyday life. While it is phrased in terms that are foreign to our setting today, the underlying truth behind this 2nd great commandment is highly relevant to each of us here this morning.

I will get right to the heart of how it relates to us.

- The **first** commandment ***do not worship any other gods besides me*** points out **whom** we are to worship.
- The **second** commandment ***do not make idols of any kind*** ... tells us **how** we are to worship.
 - The first commandment calls upon us to **worship only God**,
 - The second commandment calls us to **a worship that is pure and true** so that in no way is the magnitude of God's incredible greatness **diminished** or **distorted**.

1st commandment: who we are to worship: Worship only God

2nd commandment: how we are to worship: Worship in spirit & truth.

John 4:24 NAS

God is spirit; and those who worship Him must worship in spirit and truth.

God is spirit, He is not visible, material, or bound to a particular location. He is to be worshipped sincerely from heart wherever you are, not in any one locality.

And He is to be worshipped according to truth – He is to be worshipped for who He really is.

Golden calf

When we think of the 2nd commandment, many of us think of Exodus 32 where the Hebrew people asked Aaron to make them a god.

Scholars have two interpretations from the text as to why the Israelites worshipped a golden calf.

- ❶ The first is that the Israelites created their own god.
- ❷ The second theory, and the one I think is most likely accurate, is that the Israelites fashioned a representation of God and that representative became a distorted god to them.

Two exclusions:

Do not make idols of any kind, whether in the shape of birds or animals or fish...

1. Excludes worshipping a false god

2. Excludes an artistic expression of the true God as an aid to worship.

Never, ever, for worship purposes, represent the Creator by anything created.

God knows that it can be difficult for us to worship Himself who is invisible. He knew that we would be tempted to use visual aids to be a focal point for our worship. But we are not to do that.

Pictures in teaching

I think it is acceptable to use pictures of Jesus for teaching purposes when they accompany Bible readings and stories – but not in the context of public or private worship.



Two problems with using religious symbols as aids to worship:

Types of such religious symbols today:

- Statues of Jesus, Mary, or saints.
- Paintings of these people or God Himself
- Crucifix A representation of Jesus on a cross – or an empty cross –

Problem #1. Over time, they can become objects of worship

Movie Castaway

Some of you may recall the movie “Castaways” in which the character, played by Tom Hanks, is deserted on an island. To amuse himself in his loneliness, he takes a Wilson volleyball and paints a face on it. Then he starts talking to it. After a while, “Wilson” becomes an object of affection for him he nearly risks his life to preserve.

Start, then becomes...

Similarly, in worship – that which starts out as a mere aid eventually begins to take the place of the true God himself -- the object can be regarded with superstitious reverence.

Bronze serpent

This is exactly what happened in the OT with the bronze serpent (Num. 21:6-9; 2 Kings 18:4). God originally provided it to them as a guide to trust in faith that He would forgive and heal them. However, over time God’s people began to burn incense to this symbol in worship! King Hezekiah, motivated by a righteous zeal for the Lord, destroyed this originally good symbol because of their abuse of this object in worship.

Banners

Twice I visited an evangelical church that makes use of beautiful banners on poles with a wonderful procession. It’s quite impressive, but then the last banner is paraded down the isle – I forgot what it was exactly but it pertained to a symbol for Jesus— possibly a lamb. When that one comes down the isle, the whole congregation suddenly stands in reverence. You continue that practice long enough and subtly that banner itself becomes a special sacred object. In fact, when I was slow to rise to my feet, I got a look from a member that sternly indicated to me, that I best stand up too!

Oakwood’s lack of a cross

See above

Second problem with using religious symbols as aids to worship:

Problem #2: They reduce and distort the magnitude of God's character

Isaiah 40:18

To whom, then, can we compare God? What image might we find to resemble him?

Chewing gum & Mount Rushmore

A few days ago, many of us Americans celebrated our country’s freedom and thanksgiving for our heritage. What if I were to say, I want to give you a tell all representation of the birth, growth, and development of the first 150 years of the United

United States of America? And then I pulled out of my mouth a piece of chewing gum and attempted to mold the likeness of George Washington, Thomas Jefferson, Theodore Roosevelt, and Abraham Lincoln.

How well would I have captured the greatness of our nation's heritage? I'd do a lot better wouldn't I, if I were to show you a patriotic **picture of Mount Rushmore**? Even as great as this image is, it still falls way short of communicating the accomplishments of four great presidents' let alone the entirety of our nation.

In a similar fashion, images of God reduce the magnitude of God's awesome character and His distorts true character.

Problem with a crucifix

We have the same problem with other images of Jesus Christ, like the crucifix. It captures only one aspect of Christ -- His suffering. It communicates nothing of his glory, joy, holiness, divine power. Jesus is not helplessly dead upon the cross; He is alive!

We should just as well have a picture of him

- **Manger**, representing God the Son becoming a man
- with a **scroll** representing Jesus' teaching ministry
- or a **staff** representing Jesus as our shepherd
- **lilies**, as a symbol of when Jesus kindly blessed the children
- a **whip** as a symbol of his righteousness in driving out the temple money changers
- Brilliant **white garment**, as one who victoriously rose from the dead
- Truth = The fullness of God as revealed in Scripture.
- Phil 3:3 *we worship by the Spirit of God.* -- we come to Jesus directly through the Holy Spirit without any images or aids



The importance of accurate mental images of God

Imaging God through the work of our hands is a violation of the 2nd commandment; so too is our mental imaging of God, based on our own opinions, a breach of the 2nd commandment.

Jesus said we are to worship in spirit and truth. Apart from Biblical revelation, it is wrong

wrong to attempt to imagine what God is like – otherwise will also distort who God really is, if left to our own imaginations (Rm 1 teaches this)

Isaiah 55:8-9

My thoughts are not your thoughts, neither are your ways My ways, declares the Lord. For as the heavens are higher than the earth, so are my ways higher than yours.

Sometimes all we grasp about God is a single snap shot of His identity. It is essential that we see the full color photo album -- from God's word.

Examples:

Apathetic God

Some see him as the man upstairs, a kind of benevolent old gramps who really doesn't care about what we do and think. I can live my life my way -- God will grant me heaven in the end no matter what. That distorted snap shot causes more people to wind up in hell for all eternity than any other perspective.

Punitive God

Others see God as an angry punitive God without any kindness or forgiveness. God is like a nursing mother, an ever-faithful friend, one who loves us in spite of our sinfulness. Some of you have been afflicted all your life with an angry vindictive view of God. Please go to the Bible and learn more fully just who he is. What a freedom that will create for you.

Conclusion

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