

Why the Cross?

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The late, William f. Buckley Jr., a consummately articulate and highly intelligent and eclectic politically conservative author and editor of the *National Review*, was also a devout and faithful Roman Catholic and a committed Christian who once hosted a show on the Public Broadcasting System called *The Firing Line*. Whenever possible I would engage myself in viewing that with pen in hand to write down the incredibly erudite words that Buckley used so frequently with a flip of the tongue; terminology which defined him as a brilliant, scholarly, well-educated and intellectually cultured individual. After the show ended I went directly to my Collegiate Dictionary and looked up the meanings of the vocabulary which had dumb-founded, astonished and amazed me.

Buckley was fond of having a debate with liberals of every stripe and I reveled at his ability to stagger them with his wit, well ordered, logical thought processes and powers of reasoning: I learned much about debating from him. If I ever wanted to emulate any earthly being it was Buckley. He did not however, confine his guests to those who derive their ideologies from the likes of Karl Marx, Freud or Nietzsche. On the contrary he often invited fellow ideological conservatives and was quite fond of engaging the former agnostic, skeptic who converted to Christianity, the brilliant British Christian apologist and journalist Malcolm Muggeridge. During the course of one such interview in September of 1980, the iconoclastic Muggeridge told a parable of which he often thought. It had to do with the apostle Paul, prior to starting off on his first missionary journey, consulting a public relations man as to just how he might best promote this new thing he called the Gospel. The public relations man answered, "Well sir you've got to have some visible sign of your faith." Paul answered, "Well I've got one, I've got this cross." The public relations man began to laugh uncontrollably and when he had gotten control he said, "You can't popularize a thing like that man...It's absolutely insane." You see, for a 1st century citizen of Rome, as both men from Tarsus were, the cross was not a sign of faith but of execution. The Romans used crosses to put to death all kinds of criminals who deserved capital punishment.

In the days of the French revolution it would be like having a miniature guillotine hanging around your neck, a minute copy of the Wild West a hangman's noose in the 1800s or in our day it would be akin to dangling a tiny replica of an electric chair, gas chamber or syringe

and needle used in lethal injections on a gold chain. Why then a cross? What is it we are saying when we wear one or hang some in our church? There are several things we are saying and those pertinent messages are the subject of this essay.

A Symbol of Death

Every Christian knows that Jesus died on a Roman cross for our sins. Death and the shedding of blood for original sin's remission is a thread (red in color) that runs through the entire Bible; Old and New Testaments alike. Killing was first enacted by God to cover the sin and shame experienced by Adam and Eve after they had fallen from grace. *The LORD God made garments of skin for Adam and his wife and clothed them.* (Genesis 3:21). Those garments came from slain animals. It was also a lesson taught to and learned by their son Abel, but one that his brother Cain utterly ignored, much to God's displeasure and Cain's devastating eternal consequence. *In the course of time Cain brought some of the fruits of the soil as an offering to the LORD. But Abel brought fat portions from some of the firstborn of his flock. The LORD looked with favor on Abel and his offering, but on Cain and his offering he did not look with favor. So Cain was very angry, and his face was downcast.* (Genesis 4:3-5)

Physical death is an inevitable consequence of being born; *Just as man is destined to die once, and after that to face judgment* (Hebrews 9:27); *It is better to go to a house of mourning than to go to a house of feasting, for death is the destiny of every man; the living should take this to heart.* (Ecclesiastes 7:2) But the cross also reminds those of us who have put our God given faith in the finished work of Christ on that cross, and His subsequent resurrection to life again, that a second death (a spiritual one) is not in our future. We read in Revelation 20:6; *Blessed and holy are those who have part in the first resurrection. The second death has no power over them...*The first resurrection involves believers and was described by Paul as follows: *Brothers, we do not want you to be ignorant about those who fall asleep, or to grieve like the rest of men, who have no hope. We believe that Jesus died and rose again and so we believe that God will bring with Jesus those who have fallen asleep in him. According to the Lord's own word, we tell you that we who are still alive, who are left till the coming of the Lord, will certainly not precede those who have fallen asleep. For the Lord himself will come down from heaven, with a loud command, with the voice of the archangel and with the trumpet call of God, and the dead in Christ will rise first. After that, we who are still alive and are left will be caught up together with them in the clouds to meet the Lord in the air. And so we will be with the Lord forever. Therefore encourage each other*

with these words. (1 Thessalonians 4:13-18) The second death is later defined in Revelation 20:14 as an eternal, painful and lonely existence in the *Lake of Fire*.

Not only does the cross remind us of Christ's substitutionary death on our behalf, and that physical inevitability we all face, but it also reminds us that we are to die (figuratively) to our old self and the inborn desires of our sinful nature and live a new life in Christ. Paul put it this way, *I have been crucified with Christ and I no longer live, but Christ lives in me. The life I live in the body, I live by faith in the Son of god who loved me and gave Himself for me.* (Galatians 2:20) and in his 2nd letter to his student Paul wrote, *Here is a trustworthy saying: If we died with him, we will also live with him.* (2 Timothy 2:11)

Furthermore the cross and its symbolic representation of death should remind each Christian about the state of our soul prior to becoming children of God (*children born not of natural descent, nor of human decision or a husband's will, but born of God-John 1:13*) The apostle Paul clearly teaches us that we were spiritually dead from the moment of our first birth until the very instant when we were born again; spiritually dead people can't make spiritual decisions that involve receiving Christ. *As for you, you were dead in your transgressions and sins, in which you used to live when you followed the ways of this world and of the ruler of the kingdom of the air, the spirit who is now at work in those who are disobedient.* (Ephesians 2:1-2). Then came the good news: *But because of his great love for us, God, who is rich in mercy, made us alive with Christ even when we were dead in transgressions—it is by grace you have been saved.* (Ephesians 2:4-5)

A Symbol of Punishment

Crucifixion was never performed for ceremonial or figurative reasons; usually, its only purpose was to provide an exceptionally painful, gruesome, and public death, using whatever means was most expedient for that objective. In fact, crucifixion was only a capricious detachment of a much wider, continuous spectrum of slow and painful methods of execution used in the 1st century; others of which included assorted forms of impalement, hanging from hooks, burning at the stake, exposure to ferocious, carnivorous, wild beasts, stoning etc.

Crucifixion probably originated with ancient Persians; current Iran. There is evidence, that captured pirates were crucified by the Greeks in the port of Athens in the 7th century BC. Alexander the Great introduced the practice throughout his empire after his defeat of the

Persian Empire. He once crucified a general who disagreed with his campaign plans. It is worthy of note that David wrote these words in the prescient, messianic Psalm 22:16, ... *a band of evil men has encircled me, they have pierced my hands and my feet...* That scriptural prophecy, depicting how the Lord Jesus would die, was penned on a scroll four centuries before the Persians thought up this particularly heinous act of capitol punishment. The Romans later adopted the custom from the Carthaginians and used it for the castigation of slaves, rebels, and especially abhorrent enemies and criminals. Condemned Roman citizens were usually not liable to crucifixion except for high crimes against the state, such as treason. The Romans used it during the Spartacus uprising (popularized by Hollywood), during the Roman Civil War, and the devastation of Jerusalem in 70 AD. Crucifixion was considered an ignominious, humiliating and disgraceful way to die. Emperor Constantine put an end to crucifixion in the Roman Empire, when he was converted to the faith and Christianity became the state religion in 312 AD.

Did Jesus deserve such punishment? Of course not. The Bible clearly teaches the fact that Jesus was without sin of any sort. He was perfectly obedient to every one of God's commandments. *God made him who had no sin to be sin for us, so that in him we might become the righteousness of God.* (2 Corinthians 5:21) then, *Because he himself suffered when he was tempted, he is able to help those who are being tempted.* (Hebrews 2:18) and ... *we do not have a high priest who is unable to sympathize with our weaknesses, but we have one who has been tempted in every way, just as we are—yet was without sin* (Hebrews 4:15) Furthermore as Pilate declared He was innocent of all alleged crimes against the state. Pilate told the Jews, *You take him and crucify him. As for me, I find no basis for a charge against him.* (John 19:6)

We are the ones who deserve the punishment not Christ Jesus. We are the ones who possess original sin. Paul taught all of those Romans who used the cross to punish sin (and now teaches us as well) this truth ...*for all have sinned and fall short of the glory of God* (Romans 3:23) and furthermore that ...*the wages of sin is death, but the gift of God is eternal life in Christ Jesus our Lord.* (Romans 6-23) Christ took the punishment that you and I deserve and each time we see a cross, let us not forget it.

A Symbol of Suffering

Just like death, suffering of one degree or another is also an inevitable consequence of life. Our mother's suffered greatly to bring us into the world. We suffer emotionally when we lose a loved one to death. Children suffer when their parents divorce (an event that now occurs in one out of every two homes) or abuse them. We have at our disposal the book of Job from which we may learn many lessons regarding suffering and its inevitability. We discover that God sometimes uses it to punish our misbehavior, to enable our faith to grow and to be a witness of our love for God in the midst of such travail. In response to his wife who had complained about the troubles that she and Job had just experienced Job said, *You are talking like a foolish woman. Shall we accept good from God, and not trouble?* (Job 2:1) Then we read in Job 5:7, *Yet man is born to trouble as surely as sparks fly upward.* If you've ever sat around a camp fire on a summer evening cooking hot dogs, and singing *cum bah yah* you know what he meant by that sparks rising analogy.

Finally we read of the universal nature of trouble in Job 14:1, *Man born of woman is of few days and full of trouble.* We will not be able to avoid problems of many sorts in this fallen world. Jesus provides us with both good and bad news regarding inescapable suffering. *I have told you these things, so that in me you may have peace* (That's good news). *In this world you will have trouble* (Bad news). *But take heart! I have overcome the world.* (Good news) Paul looked at suffering as a pleasure because of his personal identification with Christ in its midst. *I want to know Christ and the power of his resurrection and the fellowship of sharing in his sufferings, becoming like him in his death, and so, somehow, to attain to the resurrection from the dead.* (Philippians 3:10-11) When ever trouble, sorrow or suffering comes our way, as it surely will, let us look at the cross and remember what horrendous suffering our Lord experienced vicariously on our behalf.

A Symbol of Judgment

Every person ever born must one day face judgment of one kind or another. *So as man is destined to die once, and after that to face judgment, so Christ was sacrificed once to take away the sins of many people; and he will appear a second time, not to bear sin, but to bring salvation to those who are waiting for him.* (Hebrews 9:27-28) Christ, who came to earth 100% human/100% divine, and representing mankind as God's judgment was poured out on

Him, suffered so that you and I and all other believers could escape that final judgment day; a day explained to us in Revelation 20:11-15; *Then I saw a great white throne and him who was seated on it. Earth and sky fled from his presence, and there was no place for them. And I saw the dead, great and small, standing before the throne, and books were opened. Another book was opened, which is the book of life. The dead were judged according to what they had done as recorded in the books. The sea gave up the dead that were in it, and death and Hades gave up the dead that were in them, and each person was judged according to what he had done. Then death and Hades were thrown into the lake of fire. The lake of fire is the second death. If anyone's name was not found written in the book of life, he was thrown into the lake of fire.*

Because of the cross and the punishment Jesus took upon Himself in our behalf, we will not face that Great White Throne judgment. However, *we must all appear before the judgment seat of Christ, that each one may receive what is due him for the things done while in the body, whether good or bad.* (2 Corinthians 5:10) At that time we will be held accountable for our works, or lack there of, not our sins. The sins were judged at the cross. We will be asked what we did with the spiritual gift or gifts that we were given. The answer to that question is already known but we will need to be reminded about our obedience or disobedience as the case may be. The apostle Peter said this about that; *Each one should use whatever gift he has received to serve others, faithfully administering God's grace in its various forms. If anyone speaks, he should do it as one speaking the very words of God. If anyone serves, he should do it with the strength God provides, so that in all things God may be praised through Jesus Christ.* (1Peter 4:10-11) As we look at the cross we are wearing or one of those placed in the front of our church, we need to take a personal spiritual inventory as to our faithfulness in administering God's grace through our gifts.

The Cross Symbolizes a Love Relationship

The cross reminds us of God's great love for us. It also reminds us of the great love we should have in return for our triune God (Father, Son and Holy Spirit) and the love that we should display to each other. *For God so loved the world that he gave his one and only Son, that whoever believes in him shall not perish but have eternal life.* (John 3:16) *This is love: not that we loved God, but that he loved us and sent his Son as an atoning sacrifice for our sins.* (1 John 4:10) *You see, at just the right time, when we were still powerless, Christ died*

for the ungodly. Very rarely will anyone die for a righteous man, though for a good man someone might possibly dare to die. But God demonstrates his own love for us in this: While we were still sinners, Christ died for us. (Romans 5:6-8). Those are just a few of the verses wherein we are reminded that the cross symbolizes God's love for us. But we are also commanded in numerous places to return that love, not just to God by means of obedience to His commands, but toward others through acts of mercy and kindness.

When asked to name the greatest of all the Ten Commandments, Jesus answered, *Love the Lord your God with all your heart and with all your soul and with all your strength and with all your mind; and, Love your neighbor as yourself.* (Luke 10:27). John reminds us, *If anyone says, "I love God," yet hates his brother, he is a liar. For anyone who does not love his brother, whom he has seen, cannot love God, whom he has not seen. And he has given us this command: Whoever loves God must also love his brother.* (1 John 4:20-21)

Solomon too had something to say about this love relationship. *Let love and faithfulness never leave you; bind them around your neck, write them on the tablet of your heart. Then you will win favor and a good name in the sight of God and man.* (Proverbs 3:3-4) The binding around the neck (a gold cross or crucifix) is the symbolic representation of the love we have written on "the tablets of our hearts" for God and others. When you view the cross recall God's love and the reciprocal love we should have for Him and toward others.

Not Just a Symbol, but the Substance of Our Faith

Then Jesus said to his disciples, If anyone would come after me, he must deny himself and take up his cross and follow me. (Matthew 16:24) Some have interpreted that to mean that as Christians we all have our "crosses" to bear. They say that their chronic illness (physical or emotional), a fractured relationship with an unbelieving spouse or a rebellious child, a lousy job with a cranky boss, or some other misfortune is that "cross." Any seemingly difficult or insurmountable problem is viewed as that "woe is me," cross. That is not at all what Jesus meant.

He was making a statement about our witness; not just the words we say but the manner in which we carry on our daily business. He was saying to those of us who identify with Him and His finished work on the cross of Calvary to live a life of substance that testifies to those

around us that we have their interests at heart and not merely our own, and that we do what Jesus would do under any and all circumstances. Peter, who had thrice denied that he even knew Christ later learned well the lesson of bearing the cross. Having learned much he passed this advice on to us. *To this you were called, because Christ suffered for you, leaving you an example, that you should follow in his steps. He committed no sin, and no deceit was found in his mouth.* (1 Peter 2:21-22). One way in which we can be witnesses is to have no deceit. Deceit is dishonesty, cheating, deception and duplicity. It displays a lack of integrity. Solomon, the author of the book of Proverbs, said these things about integrity. *The man of integrity walks securely, but he who takes crooked paths will be found out.* (Proverbs 10:9) *The integrity of the upright guides them, but the unfaithful are destroyed by their duplicity.* (Proverbs 11:3) *Righteousness guards the man of integrity, but wickedness overthrows the sinner.* (Proverbs 13:6). Integrity is the substance of the cross.

The Cross Symbolizes Obedience

The apostle Paul was very forthright in his message to the church at Philippi (and vicariously to us as well) when he wrote that *Your attitude should be the same as that of Christ Jesus: Who, being in very nature God, did not consider equality with God something to be grasped, but made himself nothing, taking the very nature of a servant, being made in human likeness. And being found in appearance as a man, he humbled himself and became obedient to death— even death on a cross!* (Philippians 2:5-8) Obedience is a sign of respect. When we disobey our sovereign God we are in essence saying that we know better than He does what is best for us. That is a highly impertinent attitude. Jesus Himself was utterly obedient to His heavenly Father. Obedience is also a sign of love. Note these words that depict Jesus' profound love and respect for His Father, Yahweh. *The world must learn that I love the Father and that I do exactly what my Father has commanded me.* (John 14:31) In another place He said, *I did not speak of my own accord, but the Father who sent me commanded me what to say and how to say it. I know that his command leads to eternal life. So whatever I say is just what the Father has told me to say.* (John 12:49-50)

In the Old Testament we learn a lesson on obedience from the actions that King Saul took following God's command to deal harshly with Israel's enemies. God sent Saul a message through His prophet Samuel. *Samuel said to Saul, "I am the one the LORD sent to anoint you king over his people Israel; so listen now to the message from the LORD. This is what the*

LORD Almighty says: 'I will punish the Amalekites for what they did to Israel when they waylaid them as they came up from Egypt. Now go, attack the Amalekites and totally destroy everything that belongs to them. Do not spare them; put to death men and women, children and infants, cattle and sheep, camels and donkeys.' "Saul did not obey the Lord completely. He thought it best to spare the life of the enemy's king, allegedly to extract vital strategic and tactical information. He also spared sheep that he planned to use as sacrifices in the worship of God. Now from a human perspective those each seemed like good reasons to disobey God. Gaining critical intelligence in a time of war makes very good sense and who could ever condemn a man who simply wants to sacrifice offerings in the worship of God? That is the human mind at work but God's mind works much differently than ours. Paul wrote, *Oh, the depth of the riches of the wisdom and knowledge of God! How unsearchable his judgments, and his paths beyond tracing out! Who has known the mind of the Lord? Or who has been his counselor?* Saul thought he knew better than God but Samuel replied: *Does the LORD delight in burnt offerings and sacrifices as much as in obeying the voice of the LORD? To obey is better than sacrifice, and to heed is better than the fat of rams.* (! Samuel 15:22)

Jesus told His disciples, *If anyone loves me, he will obey my teaching.* (John 14:23) The apostle John tells us, *This is love for God: to obey his commands. And his commands are not burdensome, for everyone born of God overcomes the world. This is the victory that has overcome the world, even our faith.* (1 John 5:3) When we wear a cross we are in essence saying to the world, your ways and my ways part company when your ways are contrary to God's. David put it this way in the first Psalm. *Blessed is the man who does not walk in the counsel of the wicked or stand in the way of sinners or sit in the seat of mockers. But his delight is in the law of the LORD, and on his law he meditates day and night.* (Psalm 1:1-2)

Note the insidious progression of sinning that this blessed, happy, fulfilled Christian has chosen not to follow. He does not casually take a walk with the ungodly, stand and contemplate the temptations put forth by the irreverent person or sit down with the unrighteous people and participate in the mockery of the cross he wears. Instead, loving the law (literally the Bible) and the commandments of God, he meditates (remembers, muses) on what he has learned and puts it into practice as he lives from day to day.

Thus we have learned that the cross should mean a great deal to those of us who identify with Christ, who share the good news with others and who endeavor, even struggle, to live a life worthy of bearing His name. The cross should be more substantive than symbolic, more ideological than iconic, more of a statement of purpose than a sign of our religious persuasion. The cross is more than a trinket, it's a sign of trust; more than jewelry, it's Jesus dying for our sins; more than an ornament it serves to remind us of the omnipresent, omnipotent, omniscient God who loves us and protects us until the day He calls us home.

Wearing the cross means that we are willing not just to figuratively die to our old nature but that we are willing to literally die a physical death, if it ever comes to that, as opposed to denying that we are His and He is ours. If we are to be laughed at, like the public relations man did when he saw Paul's cross in Malcom Muggeridge's provocative, yet profound fable, let it be because the world thinks we are fools due to our strong commitment to the truth of the Bible, the Christ of the cross and His church universal. Their laughter should be expected, *For the message of the cross is foolishness to those who are perishing, but to us who are being saved it is the power of God.* (1 Corinthians 1:18)

Soli Deo Gloria