

# Getting A Clearer Picture:

*Clearing-Up Misconceptions About Crucifixes*

*And Other Religious Art in Church and Christian Home*



**Martin Luther:**

“Now we do not request more than that one permit us to regard a crucifix or a saint’s image as a witness, for remembrance, as a sign as that image of Caesar was. Should it not be as possible for us without sin to have a crucifix or an image of Mary, as it was for the Jews and

Christ himself to have an image of Caesar who, pagan and now dead, belonged to the devil? Indeed, the Caesar had coined his image to glorify himself. However, we seek neither to receive nor give honor in this matter, and are yet so strongly condemned, while Christ’s possession of such an abominable and shameful image remains uncondemned.”

*Luther's Works - American Edition. (Vol. 40, Page 96). Fortress Press: Philadelphia*

## WHY THE QUESTION?

In the original giving of the Ten Commandments in the context of Old Testament Israel after the Exodus from Egypt, God gave the instruction:

*You shall not make for yourself an idol in the form of anything in heaven above or on the earth beneath or in the waters below. You shall now bow down to them or worship them. [see Exodus 20:1-4]*

Now of course, we should note that in the Tabernacle and the Temple, the Lord's place of sacrifices until the fulfillment by Christ, there were designated artistic depictions of angels and other things, but no depiction of God Himself. Christ had not yet appeared definitively in the flesh. But when Christ would be conceived by the Holy Spirit of the Virgin Mary and was born in Bethlehem, things changed in this fulfillment of Holy Scripture. Jesus is the center and focal point of all Scripture, Old and New Testament. The coming of the eternal Son of the Father was predicted and foreshadowed throughout the writings of Moses, the Prophets, and the Psalms. Jesus is the lens through which we rightly understand all of Scripture, as we apply both the law and the gospel (cf Luke 24).

In the early church, this transition from Old Testament to New and how it was to be understood even impacted the understanding of artwork in the Christian Church (especially during the controversies of the 8<sup>th</sup> and 9<sup>th</sup> centuries AD). This iconoclastic controversy revolved around the understanding of Old Testament prohibition of images in relation to the coming of Christ in the flesh, the making visible of the invisible God in Jesus of Nazareth. Some Christians wanted to say that only a cross or other symbols were permissible by law, and others understood that the incarnation changed how God may be understood. Both understood that the images themselves were not to be worshiped. During these controversies of the early church, the rise of the religion of Islam also influenced some thinkers. Islam strongly held that the divine could not be depicted. However, Christians even observed that at times, even in the Old Testament, could would take on visible aspects as He engaged with His people (man wrestling with Jacob, burning bush, pillar of cloud and fire, etc). Christ is also foreshadowed visibly in the Old Testament – Passover Lamb, Melchizedek, the priesthood, the kings, the prophets, the Tabernacle and Temple, are some important examples. But the incarnation, the Word becoming flesh, was decisive in the LORD Himself becoming accessible to the senses, as St John writes in his first epistle:

*That which was from the beginning, which we have heard, which we have seen with our eyes, which we have looked upon, and our hands have handled, concerning the Word of life—<sup>3</sup> the life was manifested, and we have seen, and bear witness, and declare to you that eternal life which was with the Father and was manifested to us—<sup>3</sup> that which we have seen and heard we declare to you, that you also may have fellowship with us; and truly our fellowship is with the Father and with His Son Jesus Christ. <sup>4</sup> And these things we write to you that <sup>4</sup> your joy may be full. [1 John 1:1-4 NKJV]*

Furthermore, when considered in light of other New Testament discussions on the incarnation of the eternal Son of God, we see that Jesus is the true making visible of what was previously unseen or only revealed in shadows to us sinners:

### Colossians 1:13-15 NKJV

He has delivered us from the power of darkness and <sup>1</sup>conveyed *us* into the kingdom of the Son of His love, <sup>2</sup>in whom we have redemption <sup>3</sup>through His blood, the forgiveness of sins. <sup>4</sup>He is the image of the invisible God, the firstborn over all creation.

### Hebrews 1:1-3a (NKJV)

God, who <sup>1</sup>at various times and in various ways spoke in time past to the fathers by the prophets, <sup>2</sup>has in these last days spoken to us by *His* Son, whom He has appointed heir of all things, through whom also He made the <sup>3</sup>worlds; <sup>4</sup>who being the brightness of *His* glory and the express image of His person, and upholding all things by the word of His power, when He had <sup>5</sup>by Himself <sup>6</sup>purged <sup>7</sup>our sins, sat down at the right hand of the Majesty on high...

### Colossians 2:9 NKJV

For in Him [Christ] dwells all the fullness of the Godhead <sup>1</sup>bodily...

### John 14:6-9 NKJV

<sup>6</sup>Jesus said to him, "I am the way, the truth, and the life. No one comes to the Father except through Me. <sup>7</sup>"If you had known Me, you would have known My Father also; and from now on you know Him and have seen Him."

<sup>8</sup>Philip said to Him, "Lord, show us the Father, and it is sufficient for us."

<sup>9</sup>Jesus said to him, "Have I been with you so long, and yet you have not known Me, Philip? He who has seen Me has seen the Father; so how can you say, 'Show us the Father'?"

In the iconoclastic (literally "image breaking") controversies of the early church as the Lutheran response to the radical protestant objection to images during the Reformation era, the faithful Church responded with arguments noting what the Scriptures say in the above passages and others. Idols were depicting falsehoods. Right-teaching Christians used images and crucifixes but did not worship them. They used them to teach the faith, remind themselves of the unseen, teach biblical and church history, and inspire reverence in God's House as well as in prayer in the home. Christians were free to make use of sound artwork in various forms but should do so carefully and responsibly. This has been the historic Lutheran position. Lutherans did not seek to contradict the biblical understanding of artwork, crucifixes, icons, and such argued by earlier faithful Christians. The incarnation of Christ and the preaching of the crucifixion of the incarnate Son of God were key. And in that, Lutherans did not regard a crucifix as a denial of the resurrection but as a proclamation of our redemption. While Lutherans, in some places, got away from artwork and crucifixes they are being restored again with benefit.

### IS A CRUCIFIX A DENIAL OF THE RESURRECTION?

The short answer is: no. It is not the "empty cross" which proclaims the bodily resurrection of Christ but rather it is the EMPTY TOMB of Christ. The bodies

of those who were crucified on a Roman cross of execution were eventually taken down. The criminals crucified alongside Jesus would have also been taken down from their crosses. Jesus rose from the dead from the tomb after His burial fulfilled the Sabbath rest.

The first witnesses of our Lord's resurrection did not go out to the site of the crucifixion to discover that Jesus was raised from the dead, but rather to the tomb, where He was properly buried also to fulfill the law of God as our substitute. When we look to Matthew, Mark, Luke, and John, and the testimony in the book of Acts, as well as the apostolic epistles, it is the empty tomb and the Lord's resurrection appearances to the apostles and other Christian witnesses which bear testimony to Jesus being bodily raised from death in victory over sin and death. With all of this in mind, we certainly cannot forbid a crucifix (a cross depicting the body of Christ upon it) on the grounds that it somehow denies the resurrection. Even the Lord Jesus, after His resurrection proclaimed His crucifixion, shown the risen Christ is the same one as the crucified Christ:

*Then, the same day at evening, being the first day of the week, when the doors were shut where the disciples were<sup>19</sup> assembled, for fear of the Jews, Jesus came and stood in the midst, and said to them, "Peace be with you."<sup>20</sup> When He had said this, He showed them His hands and His side. Then the disciples were glad when they saw the Lord. [John 20:19-20 NKJV]*

Consider also that while St. Paul writes staunchly defending the bodily resurrection of Christ in chapter 15 of 1 Corinthians, he likewise stated earlier in 1 Corinthians 1 and 2:

*For Jews request a sign, and Greeks seek after wisdom;<sup>23</sup> but we preach Christ crucified, to the Jews a<sup>24</sup> stumbling block and to the<sup>25</sup> Greeks foolishness,<sup>24</sup> but to those who are called, both Jews and Greeks, Christ the power of God and the wisdom of God. [1:22-24]*

*For I determined not to know anything among you except Jesus Christ and Him crucified. [2:2]*

It is for the comfort of the gospel of Christ, the reminder of the forgiveness of sins through the atoning death of Christ, and the bold proclamation of the incarnation of the Son of God and His presence among us that we find good pious use of a crucifix in Christian freedom. Martin Luther saw their comforting pastoral use:

*"It was a good practice to hold a wooden crucifix before the eyes of the dying or to press it into their hands. This brought the suffering and death of Christ to mind and comforted the dying. But the others, who haughtily relied on their good works, entered a "heaven" that contained a sizzling fire. For they were drawn away from Christ and failed to impress His life-giving passion and death upon their hearts." [Luther's Works, American Ed.; Vol. 23 - Jn. 8:22]*