



The Crux of the Matter

Jehovah's Witnesses and the Cross of Christ

by M. Kurt Goedelman

The Apostle Paul repeatedly warned of false teachers and false prophets. In his letter to the believers at Philippi, he called these false brethren "enemies of the cross of Christ" (Philippians 3:18).

Those who follow the teachings of the Watchtower Society eventually develop a fierce antagonism for the terminology and visual representations of what they consider an "apostate" Christian Church. Clear examples include the calling of their meeting facilities "Kingdom Halls" instead of "churches" and divisions of the Bible "Hebrew and Greek Scriptures" instead of "Old and New Testaments." However, Jehovah's Witnesses despise no Christian symbol as much as the cross, which they call pagan and a phallic symbol.¹

The Watchtower's contempt for this symbol of Christ's atoning sacrifice is one of its "revised" revelations. At its inception in 1884 and for more than half a century, the Watch Tower Bible and Tract Society held the cross in high esteem. Many of the sect's publications during these early years contained references — some with vivid illustrations — of Christ's death upon a cross.

The Society's early symbol, a cross

and crown, was featured on the cover of each edition of *The Watch Tower* magazine. Founder Charles Taze Russell's pyramid monument at his grave-site in Pittsburgh's Rosemont United Cemetery bears the image, a testimony to the Society's former esteem of what it now calls pagan.

How It All Changed

The 1975 Yearbook of Jehovah's Witnesses explains why the Watchtower abandoned the cross in its symbolism:

"Beginning with its issue of October 15, 1931, *The Watchtower* no longer bore the cross and crown symbol on its cover. A few years later Jehovah's people first learned that Jesus Christ did not die on a T-shaped cross. On January 31, 1936, Brother Rutherford released to the Brooklyn Bethel family the new book *Riches*. Scripturally, it said, in part, on page 27: 'Jesus was crucified, not on a cross of wood, such as is exhibited in many images and pictures, and which images are made and exhibited by men; Jesus was crucified by nailing his body to a tree.'"²

The following year, then-Watchtower president Joseph Rutherford again pressed the modified view in his 1937 publication, *Enemies*. Here again, on page 187, he wrote, "Jesus was not crucified on a cross."

True to Rutherford's revelation, current Watchtower publications portray Jesus on an upright stake with his hands placed over his head instead of outstretched on a horizontal beam.³ The April 1, 1965, issue of *The Watchtower* describes their version of how Jesus was killed:

"His hands being held, one upon the other, until the spike punctured and tore through the flesh to embed itself in the wood. The red of his blood beginning to stain his hands when another spike was driven through his feet. Then the stake being swung upright until his whole weight hung on these two points."⁴

The Watchtower insists that its account is rooted in Scripture, citing a more accurate interpretation of the original Greek. The Appendix of the 1985 edition of *The Kingdom Interline*

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(1 Thessalonians 5:21, 1 John 4:1). Never set a great name against the Divine testimony. Admit only the one standard; like the noble Bereans, who would not believe even an Apostle's word except it was confirmed by the written testimony (Acts 17:11)."³⁴

Endnotes:

1. Wilfred Bockelman, *Gothard, the Man and His Ministry: An Evaluation* (Santa Barbara, Calif., Quill Publications, 1976).
2. Ibid., pg. 83. Note: Bockelman also says on page 140: "I also feel that many of the things he says are also very close to the borderline of leading people to bondage rather than freedom."
3. Tim Crater, "Bill Gothard's View of the Exception Clause," *The Journal of Pastoral Practice*, Vol. 4, No. 3, (Phillipsburg, N.J., Presbyterian and Reformed Publishing Co., 1980), pp. 5-12.
4. Jay Adams, *Marriage, Divorce and Remarriage in the Bible*, (Phillipsburg, N.J.; Presbyterian and Reformed Publishing Co., 1980), pp. 55-59.
5. *Rebuilder's Guide*, (Oak Brook, Ill., Institute in Basic Youth Conflicts, 1982), pg. 58.
6. Charles Ryrie, *Biblical Teaching on Divorce and Remarriage* (Used by permission, Institute in Basic Youth Conflicts, 1981).
7. *Men's Manual*, Vol. 1, (Oak Brook, Ill., Institute in Basic Youth Conflicts, 1979, 1981), pg. 90.
8. Copy of December 8, 1986 letter on file.
9. Bill Gothard, *Supplementary Alumni Booklet, Conquering Impossible Mountains*, Vol. 9 (Oak Brook, Ill., Institute in Basic Youth Conflicts, 1983), pg. 15.
10. Bill Gothard, *Ten Reasons Why Adopted Children Tend to Have More Conflicts* (Oak Brook, Ill., Institute in Basic Youth Conflicts, 1982), pp. 1-2.
11. Marilyn Willet Heavilin, *Roses in December*, (Nashville, Thomas Nelson Publishers, 1993), pg. 21.
12. Adam Clarke, *Clarke's Commentary*, Vol. 1, (New York-Nashville, Abingdon Press, No Date), pp. 402-403.
13. *Christianity Today*, August 8, 1980, "Bill Gothard Steps Down During Institute Shakeup," pp. 46-47.
14. Robert Sheridan, "Bill Gothard And Dispensationalism," Graduate paper, Calvary Bible College, pp. 18-19. Copy on file. See also Bill Gothard, *Research in Principles of Life Advance Seminar Textbook*, (Oak Brook, Ill., Institute in Basic Youth Conflicts, 1986), pg. 172.
15. For more information on the Ebionites, see G.R. Fisher, "Here Come the Ebionites," *PFO Newsletter*, Vol. 4, No. 4, pp. 2, 7.
16. *Advanced Seminar Textbook*, pg. 179.
17. Ibid., pg. 180.
18. Ibid., pg. 182.
19. Ibid., pg. 183.
20. Bill Gothard, *Men's Institute Curriculum*, (Oak Brook, Ill., Institute in Basic Youth Conflicts, 1980), pg. 2.
21. Francis A. Schaeffer, *The Church at the End of the 20th Century* (Downers Grove, Ill., InterVarsity Press, 1970), pp. 74-77.
22. Bill Gothard, *The Basic Church Ministry, How to Solve Perplexing Church Problems* (Oak Brook, Ill., Institute in Basic Youth Conflicts, 1979).
23. See *Rebuilder's Guide*, pages 221 & 222, Chapter 7, "Begin Through the Church."
24. *Basic Church Ministry*, pg. 6.
25. Bill Gothard, *Men's Manual*, Vol. 2, (Oak Brook, Ill., Institute in Basic Youth Conflicts, 1985), pp. 135-141.
26. Ibid., pp. 174-179.
27. Ibid., pp. 210-217.
28. *Men's Manual*, Vol. 2, pp. 226-229.
29. Cited by Agnes C. Lawless with John W. Lawless, *The Drift Into Deception*, (Grand Rapids, Mich., Kregel Resources, 1995), pg. 125.
30. *Advanced Seminar Textbook*, pp. 355-358.
31. Henry Thiessen, *Introductory Lectures In Systematic Theology*, (Grand Rapids, Mich., Wm. B. Eerdmans Publishing Co., 1949), pg. 132.
32. *Advanced Seminar Textbook*, pg. 173.
33. Ibid., pg. 356.
34. Charles Bridges, *A Commentary on Proverbs*, (London, The Banner of Truth Trust, 1968), pg. 180.

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ear Translation of the Greek Scriptures says:

"There is no evidence that the Greek word *stau·ros'* here [Matthew 27:40] meant a cross such as the pagans used as a religious symbol for many centuries before Christ. In the classical Greek the word *stau·ros'* meant merely an upright stake, or pale, or a pile such as is used for a foundation. ... The apostles Peter and Paul also used the word *xy'lon* to refer to the torture instrument upon which Jesus was nailed, and this shows that it was an upright stake without a crossbeam, for that is what *xy'lon* in this special sense means. ... Evidence is, therefore, completely lacking that Jesus Christ was crucified on two pieces of timber placed at right angles. We

do not want to add anything to God's written Word by inserting the pagan cross-concept into the inspired Scriptures, but render *stau·ros'* and *xy'lon* according to the simplest meanings."⁵

Likewise, a recent Watchtower magazine said:

"The Bible shows that Jesus was not executed on a conventional cross at all but, rather, on a simple stake, or *stau·ros'*. This Greek word, appearing at Matthew 27:40, basically means a simple upright beam or pole, such as those used in building foundations. Hence, the cross never represented true Christianity."⁶

However, the Watchtower's solicitation of the Greek and its definition of *stau·ros'* is just another example of the verbal acrobatics Jehovah's Witnesses must go through to validate their distorted doctrine. While the word

stau·ros' primarily means an upright stake or pole, the word has an alternate meaning: cross. Therefore, the word does mean much more than what the Watchtower says it does.

Gerhard Kittel's *Theological Dictionary of the New Testament* gives three meanings for *stau·ros'*. The first matches the Watchtower's; the others present other distinct meanings:

"The σταυρός [stauros] is an instrument of torture for serious offenses, ... In shape we find three basic forms. The cross was a vertical, pointed stake ... or it consisted of an upright with a cross-beam above it ... or it consisted of two intersecting beams of equal length."⁷

Kittel explained the particulars involved in the carrying out of the fatal punishment upon a *stau·ros'*:

"Crucifixion took place as follows. The condemned person carried the

patibulum (cross-beam) to the place of execution — the stake already erected. Then on the ground he was bound with outstretched arms to the beam by ropes, or else fixed to it by nails. The beam was then raised with the body and fastened to the upright post.”⁸

Joseph H. Thayer concurs with the dual meaning of *stau·ros*:

“An upright stake, esp. a pointed one, ... a cross; a. the well-known instrument of most cruel and ignominious punishment, borrowed by the Greeks and Romans from the Phoenicians; to it were affixed among the Romans, down to the time of Constantine the Great, the guiltiest criminals, particularly the basest slaves, robbers, the authors and abettors of insurrections, and occasionally in the provinces, at the arbitrary pleasure of the governors, upright and peaceable men also, and even Roman citizens themselves.”⁹

Xulon (tree—rendered *xy'lon* by the Watchtower) also carries more definitions than what the Watchtower Society offers. Kittel interprets one of the renderings: “Cross. A distinctive NT use of ξύλον [xulon] is in the sense ‘cross.’”¹⁰

British scholar W.E. Vine translates *xulon* as “wood, a piece of wood, anything made of wood” and gives its application as “of the Cross, the tree being the *stau·ros*’, the upright pale or stake to which the Romans nailed those who were thus to be executed.”¹¹

It has been shown that multiple definitions can be applied to the words used to describe the instrument of Jesus’ death. If these were the only points of controversy, we could declare a stalemate. However, there is much more testimony available that, without doubt, removes any possibility of a hung jury on the subject. Let’s consider the A-B-C’s of evidence:

Archaeological Evidence

The Watchtower itself has appealed to archaeology by citing the work of a Roman Catholic scholar, Justus Lipsius (1547-1606), in an effort to support its torture stake theory. However, their use

of the 16th century writer is just another clear example of their dishonesty in trying to validate false doctrine. In the Appendix of the 1950 edition of the *New World Translation of the Christian Greek Scriptures*, one of several woodcuts is reproduced from Lipsius’ *De Cruce Liber Primus*. The illustration depicts a man being impaled on an upright stake and based upon the drawing, readers are told: “This is the manner in which Jesus was impaled.”¹²

However, when one inspects the actual *De Cruce Liber Primus*, which is part of the larger work, *Opera Omnia*, the Watchtower’s argument evaporates. The volume, a Latin work that is difficult to find, includes several woodcut illustrations portraying impalement or crucifixion. By far most of these illustrations depict not a man on a stake, but an upright stake affixed with a crossbeam — in other words, a cross.

Adding to the deception is the fact that Lipsius’ work does not state that the upright stake “is the manner in which Jesus was impaled,” as the Watchtower would have its members believe. Lipsius clearly argued for a “cross” with such statements as, “the cross was inserted and the other crosswise bar is joined and inserted with the upright plank and thus it cuts [divides] itself.”¹³

Lipsius added: “When a man, hands stretched out, worships God with a pure heart (he resembles a Cross).”¹⁴ Today, although somewhat modified, the Watchtower continues to appeal to Lipsius in the latest edition of its Greek New Testament.

Archaeological evidence favoring a cross is much more convincing. Dr. Paul Maier describes evidence that the Church used the symbol of the cross as early as the first century. In his 1976 work, *First Christians*, Maier writes:

“Christians were already established at Puteoli—[the Apostle] Paul’s fame had preceded him there ... It may be from this early congregation that faith expanded around the Bay of Naples, because there were Christians in nearby Herculaneum shortly afterward. One of the houses in that resort town, today liberated from its lava

burial by Mt. Vesuvius, shows the clear outlines of a metal cross that had been set in the wall over a charred *prie-dieu* in an upstairs room. The cross evidently is just as old a Christian symbol as the fish.”¹⁵

On the facing page, a photograph of the upstairs room is reproduced showing the outline of the cross in the wall. The photo’s caption reads:

“A primitive Christian oratory in the upper room of the so-called ‘House of Bicentenary’ at Herculaneum. A whitish stuccoed panel shows the imprint of a large cross, probably metallic, that had been removed or possibly used as a stamping device. Before it are the remains of a small wooden altar, charred by lava from the eruption of Mt. Vesuvius in 79 A.D.”¹⁶

Other scholars also agree with Maier’s assessment that the cross was quickly adopted by the Church as a Christian symbol. Michael Green, in his book, *Evangelism in the Early Church*, states:

“Some experts doubt whether the cross became a Christian symbol so early, but the recent discoveries of the cross, the fish, the star and the plough, all well known from the second century, on ossuaries of the Judaeo-Christian community in Judea put the possibility beyond reasonable cavil.”¹⁷

In 1873, French scholar Charles Clermont-Ganneau unearthed nearly 30 ossuaries southeast of Jerusalem. The small limestone burial boxes containing human bones were found at the Mount of Offense and bore Hebrew and Greek names. Some bore a cross above the name inscription. The date of the original burial is estimated to be between 70-135 A.D.¹⁸

Even more startling were the 1945 discoveries at Talpioth. Here 11 ossuaries were found and reported to be from Christian grave sites in Bethany. These burial boxes too were engraved with crosses and their burial date was estimated at 42-43 A.D. — slightly more than a decade after our Lord’s death and resurrection. Some of the ossuaries

were even inscribed with the Greek monogram for Christ (☧) as a dedicatory, leaving no doubt as to the manner of the Savior's death and the ensuing use of the cross as a Christian symbol.¹⁹

Others, even from outside the Christian community, also indicate that the weight of the historical evidence favors the cross over a stake. In 1971, *Time* magazine reported an archaeological find that had remained secret for several months:

"Israeli archaeologists announced that they had identified the remains of the unfortunate young man and found clear evidence of his grisly execution. The Israeli scholars, who studied the find for more than two years before making their announcement, were understandably cautious. What they uncovered and authenticated is the first firm physical evidence of an actual crucifixion in the ancient Mediterranean world. ... The only previously physical evidence of crucifixion was extremely tenuous. It consisted of a few bones, excavated in Italy and Rumania containing holes in the forearms and heals that could have been made during crucifixion. ... The new archaeological evidence, a byproduct of intense excavation and building activities by the Israelis in the territories they conquered in the Six-Day War, is far more substantial."²⁰

Biblical Testimony

The most desirable witness to the traditional cross conviction is that of Scripture. While we have noted above, the debate over the alternate renderings of the words translated "cross" we will, in this section, focus on Bible passages that indirectly, yet reliably, establish the validity of the cross. The first verse considered is from John's Gospel and records the testimony of the Apostle Thomas:

"The other disciples therefore were saying to him, 'We have seen the Lord!' But he said to them, 'Unless I shall see in His hands the imprint of the nails, and put my finger into the place of the nails,

and put my hand into His side, I will not believe'" (John 20:25, NASV).

The disciples had told Thomas they had seen the risen Christ and the apostle's response is paramount. While the Watchtower says Jesus' hands were laid one upon the other with a single spike,²¹ Thomas, an eyewitness of the crucifixion, used the plural form of the word "nail," while "imprint" is singular, indicating a separate nail punctured each hand leaving a single mark in each hand.

It is also wise to reflect upon Matthew's selective narration of the Lord's death. His account includes the information that:

"They put up above His head the charge against Him, which read, 'This is Jesus the King of the Jews'" (Matthew 27:37, NASV).

Again careful consideration must be given to the exacting description provided in God's inspired Word. The Roman governor Pontius Pilate had written the offense of which Christ was condemned and Matthew reported that the proclamation was "set up over his head." If Christ had been impaled as the Watchtower describes, the text would have to properly read: "set up over his hands."

One last Scripture reference is just as powerful in establishing the erroneous position of Jehovah's Witnesses. It contains the very words of Jesus Himself prophesying the Apostle Peter's martyrdom:

"Truly, truly, I say to you, when you were younger, you used to gird yourself, and walk wherever you wished; but when you grow old, you will stretch out your hands, and someone else will gird you, and bring you where you do not wish to go. Now this He said, signifying by what kind of death he would glorify God. And when He had spoken this, He said to him, 'Follow Me!'" (John 21:18-19, NASV).

Christ revealed to Peter that there would come a time when he would stretch out his hands, be bound, and

led unto death. Herein we find yet another instance of the selective wording of Scripture as Jesus declared that Peter's hands would be stretched out, not raised over his head. Moreover, fulfillment of Christ's prophecy with the confirmation of Peter's crucifixion is corroborated by the early Church Fathers. *The Bible Almanac* reports:

"The early Christian apologists Tertullian and Origen state that Peter was executed by crucifixion head-downwards in Rome. They say that he was one of thousands of Christians who died under Emperor Nero's persecution."²²

The observations of the *Almanac* are reprised by Adam Clarke with his comments on above verses from John's Gospel:

"Wetstein observes that it was a custom at Rome to put the necks of those who were to be crucified into a yoke, and to stretch out their hands and fasten them to the end of it; and having thus led them through the city they were carried out to be crucified. ... Ancient writers state that, about thirty-four years after this [Christ's proclamation], Peter was crucified; and that he deemed it so glorious a thing to die for Christ that he begged to be crucified with his head downwards, not considering himself worthy to die in the same posture in which his Lord did."²³

Peter was told by his Lord that his martyrdom was to be expected. He told Peter to "Follow me." And follow Christ he did, even unto the manner of death.

Church History

The final body of evidence comes from the Apostolic Fathers, who in some cases sat at the feet of the Apostles receiving teaching and tradition. While their writings do not warrant the priority and allegiance required by inspired Scripture, they offer valuable insight into early days of the Church.

According to *History of the Christian Church*, "The Epistle of Barnabas has considerable historical, doctrinal, and

apologetic value." The encyclopedia further notes that "The Epistle was first cited by Clement of Alexandria, and Origen, as a work of the apostolic Barnabas, who plays so prominent a part in the early history of the church. Origen seems to rank it almost with the inspired Scriptures."²⁴ In the epistle, the author relates the numerical significance in the name Jesus:

"And because the cross in the T was to have grace, He saith also three hundred. So He revealeth Jesus in the two letters, and in the remaining one the cross."²⁵

In a subsequent verse, the writer describes an Old Testament shadow of the cross as Moses stretched out his hands:

"The Spirit saith to the heart of Moses, that he should make a type of the cross and of Him that was to suffer, that unless, saith he, they shall set their hope on Him, war shall be waged against them for ever. Moses therefore pileth arms one upon another in the midst of the encounter, and standing on higher ground than any he stretched out his hands, and so Israel was again victorious."²⁶

Ignatius was a man whose life unfolded during the Church's infancy. He was appointed as second bishop at Antioch, where Paul and Barnabas left on their missionary journey recorded in Acts 13-14. In his letter to the Ephesians, he writes:

"My spirit is made an offscouring for the Cross, which is a stumbling-block to them that are unbelievers, but to us salvation and life eternal."²⁷

And in his epistle to the Trallians, he speaks of the ungodly and says:

"These men are not the Father's planting; for if they had been, they would have been seen to be branches of the Cross, and their fruit imperishable — the Cross whereby He through His passion inviteth us, being His members."²⁸

Conclusions

Christians cherish the symbol of the

cross. Yet this reverence does not allow us to worship or idolize the image, as the Watchtower would have its followers believe. Like the second century Church Father Tertullian (c. 160-220 A.D.), we find it necessary to defend Christians against the heathen charge of worshiping the cross.²⁹ The cross is but a mere trophy to remind us of what the Lord Jesus Christ attained for sinful man. No true believer venerated a literal relic or piece of wood. The "cross," like the "blood" is a term used in Scripture to illustrate the merits of Christ. The cross points us to the very heart of the Christian Gospel message as Christ, "Himself bore our sins in His own body on the cross" (1 Peter 2:24).

Paul tells believers they can experience true peace and forgiveness through the cross: "And through Him to reconcile all things to Himself, having made peace through the blood of His cross" (Colossians 1:20, NASV; see also Ephesians 2:16).

The weight and volume of evidence invalidates the Watchtower teaching of a "torture stake." Jehovah's Witnesses' hostility toward the cross of Christ comes not from a serious study of the evidence, but from the corrupt minds of their leaders.

Philip Schaff says:

"The oldest and dearest, but also probably the most abused, of the primitive Christian symbols is the cross, the sign of redemption ... The cross was despised by the heathen Romans on account of the crucifixion, the disgraced punishment of slaves and the worst criminals."³⁰

Jehovah's Witnesses, by virtue of their scorn for the symbol of Christians' redemption, find themselves in league with "heathen Romans." Yet we should not be surprised, for Paul tells us: "For the preaching of the cross is to them that perish foolishness; but unto us which are saved it is the power of God" (1 Corinthians 1:18).

Endnotes:

1. *The Watchtower*, July 1, 1964, pg. 395.
2. *1975 Yearbook of Jehovah's Witnesses*, pp. 148-149.
3. See for example, *The Watchtower*, Aug.

15, 1987, pg. 24; *My Book of Bible Stories*, pg. 100; and *From Paradise Lost to Paradise Regained*, pg. 141 for characterizations of the torture stake by Watchtower artists.

4. *The Watchtower*, April 1, 1965, pg. 211.

5. *The Kingdom Interlinear Translation of the Greek Scriptures*, 1985 edition, pp. 1149, 1151. Nearly identical statements to this effect are also found in the 1969 edition of the KIT on pages 1155 and 1157.

6. *The Watchtower*, Nov. 15, 1992, pg. 7.

7. Gerhard Kittel, *Theological Dictionary of the New Testament*, Vol. VII, pg. 572.

8. Ibid., pg. 573.

9. Joseph H. Thayer, *Thayer's Greek-English Lexicon of the New Testament*, pg. 586.

10. Kittel, *Theological Dictionary*, Vol. V, pg. 39.

11. W.E. Vine, *The Expanded Vine's Expository Dictionary of New Testament Words*, pg. 1165.

12. *New World Translation of the Christian Greek Scriptures*, 1950 edition, pg. 770. The woodcut and quotation are also found in other subsequent versions of *New World Translation*, including the 1951 edition (pp. 769-770); the 1971 large print edition (pp. 1360-1361); and *The Kingdom Interlinear Translation*, 1969 edition, (pp. 1155-1156).

13. Justus Lipsius, *De Cruce Liber Primus*, Chapter IX, pg. 24. Translated from Latin by Marie Shively Tseng, teaching assistant, University of Southern California. Tseng's translation was verified as accurate by Dr. J. Donato, head of the Language Department of USC.

14. Ibid., pg. 25.

15. Paul Maier, *First Christians*, pg. 140.

16. Ibid., pg. 141.

17. Michael Green, *Evangelism in the Early Church*, pp. 214- 215.

18. See further, Jack Finegan, *The Archeology of the New Testament*, pp. 238-240.

19. Ibid., pp. 240-243.

20. *Time* magazine, Jan. 18, 1971, pg. 64.

21. *The Watchtower*, April 1, 1965, pg. 211.

22. James I. Packer, Merrill C. Tenney and William White, Jr., *The Bible Almanac*, pg. 532.

23. Adam Clarke, *Adam Clarke's Commentary on the Bible*, pg. 955.

24. Philip Schaff, *History of the Christian Church*, Vol. II, pp. 674-674.

25. J.B. Lightfoot and J.R. Harmer, Editors, *The Apostolic Fathers*, "The Epistle of Barnabas" (9:8b), pg. 278.

26. Ibid., (12:2) pp. 280-281.

27. Ibid., "The Epistle of Ignatius to the Ephesians" (18:1), pg. 141.

28. Ibid., "The Epistle of Ignatius to the Trallians" (11:1-2), pp. 148-149.

29. See Schaff, *History*, Vol. II, pg. 270.

30. Ibid., pp. 269, 271.

