

Symbolic Religion

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Introduction – Matt 23:1-7

- Some of the Jews interpreted Ex 13:16, Deut 6:8 literally, actually binding portions of the Old Law on their arms and foreheads
- These passages most readily appear to be figurative – Deut 6:4-9; **Prov 3:1-3**, 6:21
- **Lev 20:7-8** – Israel was to be different from the world by their *obedience to God*, not special parchments attached to their clothing or bodies!
- Matt 23:1-7 – The Pharisees religion had become *merely* symbolic: they did not keep the Law of God, but made their religious symbols very large so as to *appear* to others that they especially revered the Law!

I. Religious Symbols Today

The idea of religious symbolism to identify oneself as a Christian is not an idea foreign to our society:

- The *fish symbol*, supposedly used by Christians as early as the first century to identify each other and their secret meeting places during the years Rome was violently opposed to Christianity, experienced a surge of popularity in the 20's and 70's
 - No agreement among historians as to the origin of the fish, or *ichthys*, symbol
 - Perhaps an acronym, *Iesous Christos Theou Huios Soter* (IXΘYE)
- The *cross*, as a logo or worn as jewelry, has been a symbol of Christianity since Constantine (East) and Licinius (West) sent a letter to the governor of Bithynia referred to as the Edict of Milan establishing religious tolerance across the Empire of Rome.
 - “The early Christians generally avoided representing the body of Christ on the cross, for the first evidence of such representation comes from the 5th century. In fact, until the 4th century, even the simple cross rarely appeared in public” (*New Catholic Encyclopedia*).
 - In Rome, the cross was the symbol of a slave's death, a murder's punishment: it was looked on with the profoundest horror and associated only with pain, guilt and shame – not a single positive connotation!
 - **Heb 12:2** Jesus Christ despised the shame of the cross!
 - “But after the celebrated vision of Constantine (312 A.D.), he ordered his friends to make a cross of gold and gems, such as he had seen, and the towering eagles resigned the flags unto the cross” (R.L. Fox, *Pagans and Christians*).
 - Thus, Constantine profoundly altered the Western image of the cross and its reproductions
- The *WWJD* acronym, “*What Would Jesus Do?*” – a reminder to follow Jesus' example in daily life.

II. Secret Discipleship Condemned By Christ

- The idea that a Christian would wish to be identified as a believer in the gospel of Jesus Christ, not embarrassed or ashamed or fearful of the consequences, is commendable!
- **Luke 9:23-26, 12:8-9; Rom 1:16-17**

III. Religious Symbolism Or Symbolic Religion?

I would be the last person to condemn an individual for carrying around a physical symbol to remind himself/herself to follow Jesus and avoid temptation! I suppose that even marking your vehicle or backpack with a fish symbol to identify yourself with the gospel is really a matter of personal conscience. But I can offer some Scriptural ideas that should be considered before any Christians uses a physical symbol as a stamp of religious identity:

A. Is Your Religion Merely Symbolic?

The problem with the symbolic religion of the Pharisees in Matthew 23 was that their religious conviction went no deeper than their outward symbols! In other words, their religion had become *merely* symbolic, and nothing more. If a religious symbol is worn only as a status symbol or a show for other people, this is the same sin the Pharisees were condemned for!

- **Matt 23:5** – “to be seen by men...”
- **Matt 6:5** – “...they have their reward.”

B. What really identifies the Christian?

The second thing that I would quickly point out is that the New Testament never mentions any type of physical symbol at all that Christians are to wear to identify themselves. There is no command, there is no example, of any Christian displaying their beliefs via a physical symbol worn on their body or clothing.

And yet, Christians are certainly to be different, set apart from the world, having obedience to God that is visible and noticeable to the world!

- **Matt 5:14-16, 38-45a** – Different in good works, in mercy, in loving enemies
- **Titus 2:6-8; Eph 4:29** – Different in sound, edifying speech
- **I Pet 2:11-12** – Honorable conduct, good works
- **I Pet 2:21-24** – Actually following the footsteps of Christ, not just wearing a symbol that claims I do!

Conclusion: You see, crosses and fish symbols and bracelets – these things can be worn by anyone, and yet we witness that all the people who wear them or display them do not obey the gospel!

- Wearing crosses around the neck has become popular by even irreligious people, but what about loving one’s neighbor as oneself, or showing mercy to the undeserving? These haven’t caught on so well!
- Displaying religious bumper stickers is very common, but what about purity in speech, speaking only words that edify? This definitely has been forgotten, even by supposedly religious people!
- Wearing bracelets that ask, “What Would Jesus Do?” can be seen everywhere, but how many people have knowledge of the Scriptures enough to truly know what Jesus would do in various situations?

As Christians, we are a peculiar people, set apart and different from the world – but not because of symbols we wear on our bodies or bind to our clothing. We show the world that we’re different by living by a different standard, the standard of unwavering obedience to God and on failing good works. Read **II Cor 6:16b-7:1**.