

Christianity without Crucifixion in the Early Church

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*Paradise, not crucifixion, was the dominant image of
early Christian sanctuaries, and paradise was this world, not the next.*

—Rita Brock and Rebecca Ann Parker, *Saving Paradise*

In July of 2002 Rita Brock and Rebecca Ann Parker set out on a Mediterranean journey to confirm a claim that had been made for many years: Christian art did not show a crucified Christ until the 10th Century. Brock and Parker confess that “initially we didn’t believe it could be true. Surely the art historians were wrong.”

But Brock and Parker found Christ as a victorious king and as a good shepherd with a live lamb on his shoulders, but they did find any images of Jesus dying on the cross. In the 6th Century St. Apollinare Nouvo Church there are 26 panels telling the life of Christ. The tenth panel is Simon of Cyrene carrying a cross and the next panel shows the angel and the two women at the tomb. Churches that have the Stations of the Cross always have the Crucifixion between these two panels. Curiously but significantly, this panel is missing in this early church.

Early Christian artists were not at odds with written texts. Already in circulation at the end of the first century, the *Didache* (also called *The Teaching of the Twelve Apostles*) does not mention the Crucifixion. Later in second century Pope Clement celebrates the resurrected but not the crucified Christ. Also in the second century Justin Martyr performs the Lord’s Supper without mention of the cross and without the phrase “poured out for the remission of sins.”

There’s an old joke about people wearing electric chairs around their necks if Jesus had come to middle 20th Century America. This bit of crudity, however, may reveal the reason why the Crucifixion does not appear in early Christian art. These Christians had seen a lot of crucifixions and perhaps they did not want their savior to be associated with the most shameful and gruesome form of execution known to humankind.

Bishop Cyril of Jerusalem’s statement is telling: “Now that the Resurrection has followed the cross, I am not ashamed to declare it.” (There had been controversy about whether it was a shameful event best not mentioned.) In his churches the Resurrection was celebrated every Sunday, but the Crucifixion was commemorated only on Good Friday. Unlike Gnostic Christians who denied the reality of the Crucifixion, early orthodox Christians did accept it but did not make it central to worship.

Many early churches were decorated in ways that made them an earthly paradise—a heaven on earth. Above the altar in the 6th century San Vitale church in Ravenna there is a globe on which the non-crucified Christ is sitting. Underneath the globe the four rivers of Eden

flow out into a beautiful valley. Christians then were not saved by the blood of the dying Jesus; instead, they were grafted on to the Tree of Life.

St. Ambrose, the Italian bishop who baptized St. Augustine in AD 387, believed that Paradise was not only present in churches but also in the souls of all believers. The early Christians took very seriously Jesus' proclamation in Luke's Gospel that "the Kingdom of God is in your midst" (17:20, NIV).

Before the 10th Century the sacramental bread and wine represented a heavenly transfer of Christ's glorified body and blood, but after that orthodoxy required that one believe that it was the crucified body and blood. Many early theologians pointed out that Jesus declared that the wine and bread were his blood and body before he was crucified.

Cyril of Jerusalem, made bishop in AD 350, preached that the Eucharist represented a "spiritual sacrifice of a bloodless offering." At the moment that the bread and wine were consecrated the Holy Spirit descended to earth and reopened the gates of a New Eden and a new humanity restored by Christ.

Rather than wonder, awe, and celebration of a new life in Christ, Charlemagne's priests preached in the 8th Century that Christ the Judge was present in the Lord's Supper, and there he instilled "a moment terrible fear, of wailing and gnashing of teeth, of weeping and despair."

In the early church the Eucharist was feast at the table of Paradise not an event condemning sinners and warning of divine wrath. In order to be baptized in the early Church one had to prove they were leading a virtuous life, but the baptismal rituals did not mention the doctrine of original sin.

Living at the turn of the 3rd Century Church Father Irenaeus taught that baptism made the believer a full member of the church, which was, according to him, "paradise in this world." For Cyril of Jerusalem baptism meant that believers are grafted onto the Tree of Life: "Adam by the Tree fell; you by the Tree are brought to Paradise."

Many Christians do not seem to be aware that Jesus shared the title "Son of God," and Cyril taught that in baptism we are adopted as sons and daughters of God. Interestingly enough, those being baptized were stripped naked so that they were like Adam and Eve in Eden. As Cyril states: "You are in the image of the first man, Adam, who in the garden was likewise naked and did not blush." After the communal baptism the new Christians were led to the doors of the church and were allowed to enter paradise on earth.

The first known crucifix was made by a Saxon artist who carved a life-size dead Jesus from oak. Called the Gero Crucifix it was produced in AD 965-70 and is displayed in the cathedral in Cologne, Germany. The ancient Saxons worshipped trees and they were converted by Charlemagne's troops at the point of the sword. As Parker and Brock state: "The cross—once

a sign of life—became for them a sign of terror. Pressed by violence into Christian obedience, the Saxons produced art that bore the marks of their baptism in blood.”

In a supreme and terrible irony the humiliated Saxons identified with the crucified Jesus and they saw their own wounds—physically and spiritually—in his tortured figure. Carolingian church authorities imprisoned Saxon theologians, who continued to believe the Eucharist contained the heavenly Christ rather than the new view that it was the judging crucified Christ.

Brock and Parker draw political conclusions from the replacement of Churches of Paradise with Churches of Crucifixion: “The Carolingians fused church and state in new ways, altered the long-standing Christian prohibition against the shedding of human blood, and made Christianity a colonizing tool. They aligned the Cross with military victory and laid the axe to the root of sacred trees.”

Over the next hundred years pogroms against Jews increased dramatically. Significantly, the few Christian leaders who did focus on the Crucifixion, such as Melito of Sardis, were also those who called the Jews “Christ killers.” As Brock and Parker state: “Melito’s sermons show how easily a focus on the death of Jesus spilled over into the vilification of Jews.”

Under the banner of a huge red cross the Crusades sent huge military expeditions against infidels in Asia, killing thousands of Jews and other innocents on the way. In the centuries to come it would be witches and heretics who would die, and Christian violence continued in the great European empires of the 16-19th Centuries. Brock and Parker chose an appropriate subtitle for their book: *How Christianity Traded Love of this World for Crucifixion and Empire*.

In conclusion I’m reminded of a sign outside a church in Southern California at the beginning of the Iraq War. It read: “Christ: Our Commander in Chief.” Christian imperialists are still very much among us.

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