

Early Christian Symbols

The following symbols comprise the major symbols of the early church. There were many more, but these are the main ones. They are laid out in rough chronological order. The interesting fact here is that the cross—the major symbol of Christianity today—was actually a later symbol for the church. It wasn't until the 4th century, and primarily after the Council of Nicaea in 325 CE that the cross moved into general use. See the section on the cross below for details. The first four symbols, the fish, anchor, circle, and chi-rho are the most ancient symbols of the church, being in use in the first and second centuries.

The Fish

A very early Christian symbol (one of the first). The fish is an acrostic: if you take the Latin word for fish (icthys) and spell it in the Greek alphabet, each Greek letter represents another word. Ichthus, spelled in Greek = Iota Chi Theta Upsilon Sigma. That is an acrostic for "*Jesus Christ, of God, the Son, the Savior*" [Iesous (Jesus) **CH**ristos (Christ) **TH**eou (of God) **UI**ou (the Son) **S**oter (the Savior)]. An acrostic is an "*arrangement of words in which the first letter of each line ordinarily combines with others to form a word or words or the alphabet.*"

Note: SPELLING ICTHUS IN GREEK: The Greeks had two letters for "S" The "C" form is used anywhere in the word. The "S" form is only used at the end. However, there are times you find C at the end as well, thus the diversity in spellings.

The Ichthus fish is one of, if not the first, Christian creed. In this first creed we find the user of the fish saying, "I believe that Jesus Christ, a man, was indeed the Son of God and also my Savior." Notice that "God" is singular, not plural. This was a very radical statement in the midst of the Roman empire, home to hundreds of gods and deities. And because He was the Son of God, that would make Him God as well, another radical statement as only Caesar was supposed to be both human and divine. This statement that Jesus was both a man and God led to many Christians losing their lives.

Contrary to popular belief, there is no right way to "point" the direction of the fish. The symbolism is in the fish itself, not the direction it is pointing.

The History of the Fish Symbol in Christianity

The fish outline is a logical symbol for the early Christian church to adopt. Fish play a major roll in the gospels. For example:

- **Mark 1:17:** "*Come after Me, and I will make you become fishers of men.*"
- **Matthew 12:40:** "*...Jonah was three days and three nights in the belly of the great fish, so will the Son of Man be three days and three nights in the heart of the earth.*"
- **Matthew 14:17:** "*And they said to Him, 'We have here only five loaves and two fish.'*"
- **Luke 5:6:** "*And when they had done this, they caught a great number of fish, and their net was breaking.*"
- **Luke 24:42:** "*So they gave Him a piece of a broiled fish and some honeycomb.*"
- **John 21:6:** "*And He said to them, 'Cast the net on the right side of the boat, and you will find some.' So they cast, and now they were not able to draw it in because of the multitude of fish.*"
- **1 Corinthians 15:39:** "*All flesh is not the same flesh, but there is one kind of flesh of men, another flesh of beasts, another of fish, and another of birds.*"

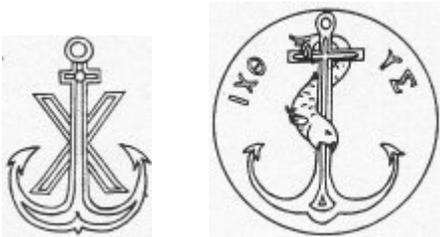
The Apostles were often referred to as "*fishers of men*". Followers of Christianity were called *Pisciculi*; the root of this Latin word is "fish". The symbols of "*sacramental fish, with wine and a*

basket of bread represents the Eucharist and the Last Supper in Christian art." The symbol was simple to draw and was often used among Christians as a type of password during times of persecution by the Roman government. If two strangers met and were unsure whether each other was a Christian, one would draw an arc in the earth like:). If the other were a Christian, they would complete the symbol with a reverse arc: (), forming the outline of a fish.

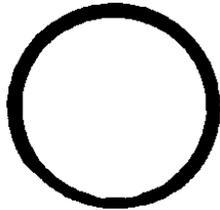


Anchor

This is one of the original, 1st century symbols used in Christianity. Hebrews 6:19 "This confidence is like a strong and trustworthy anchor for your souls." The anchor is always portrayed with the crossbar, forming a cross. Seen here are several variations, including the X or Chi for Christ and the Ichthus fish.



(Additional anchor images)



Circle

Standing for eternity, because it is without beginning and without end. The circle was also portrayed as two or three concentric circles to denote the Father, Son, and Spirit.



Chi-Rho

This symbol is not really a symbol at all but a monogram. It is the oldest known monogram of Jesus Christ. It is sometimes known as a "Christogram." The Chi and the Rho are the first three letters of word "Christ" in Greek. The chi = ch and the rho = r.

Various forms of the Chi-Rho

The last image denotes the first and last letters of "Christos." This is an older form of the Greek because of the "C" at the end instead of an "S." Both mean the same thing. Please note, when writing the last symbol the *contraction* sign (line over the letters) must be written to denote an abbreviation.



Cross

The cross is usually thought to be an early church symbol but it wasn't. The reason is because the cross was a symbol of pain and suffering. Today it would be like wearing an electric chair around your neck. Although there are limited accounts of the cross being used in the late 2nd and 3rd centuries it is a predominately 4th century symbol. It is then that the cross became a symbol of conquering death. Constantine also made the cross a popular icon when he reportedly was told by God to put a cross on all of his shields around 320 C.E.



Tau or Egyptian cross - It has only one top bar that is equal with the top of the main bar.



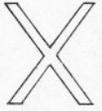
Tau cross with snake - The Tau cross is thought to be more of an old testament cross, referring to the tradition of Moses raising up the brass serpent on a "cross" to heal the people. It is thought that this was a prophetic act, a foreshadowing, of when Christ would be raised up on a cross to heal all people.



Latin Cross - The traditional form of the cross we frequently see today.



The Anchor Cross - This cross was very popular during the early church. What Jesus did on the cross is to be our anchor, bringing stability in the midst of the storms of life.



St. Andrew's Cross - This was a popular form of the cross. Tradition tells us that *St. Andrew*, before being crucified, requested that the cross he was to be crucified on be different than that of which Jesus Christ was crucified on. The "X" cross has become a symbol of humility in suffering.

The history of the cross symbol in Christianity

Early depictions on Jesus usually showed him as a shepherd carrying a lamb. Tertullian (140-230 CE), a Montanist heretic, commented in his essay *De Corona*: "*At every forward step and movement, at every going in and out, when we put on our clothes and shoes, when we bathe, when we sit at table, when we light the lamps, on couch, on seat, in all the ordinary actions of daily life, we trace upon the forehead the sign.*" This might be an early reference to individuals tracing the sign of the cross on their body.

The use of the cross as a symbol was condemned by at least one church father of the 3rd century CE because of its Pagan origins. The first appearance of a cross in Christian art is on a Vatican sarcophagus from the mid-5th Century. It was a Greek cross with equal-length arms. Jesus' body was not shown. The first crucifixion scenes didn't appear in Christian art until the 7th century CE. The original cross symbol was in the form of a Tau Cross. It was so named because it looked like the Egyptian letter "tau", or our letter "T". The Tau cross became associated with St. Philip who was allegedly crucified on such a cross in Phrygia. Later in Christian history, the Tau Cross became the Roman Cross that we are familiar with today.

The shape of the original crucifixion device is a matter for speculation. Sometimes, the Romans executed people on a Tau cross, sometimes on a Roman (Latin) cross and sometimes on a simple stake. The gospels were originally written in Greek, and they state that Jesus was crucified on a "*stauros*" (**Mark 18:21, Matthew 27:32, Luke 23:26, John 19:17**). This appears as the word "cross" in all but one of the English versions that we have examined. But in reality, the Greek word usually means a vertical pole without a crossbar. Hermann Fulda, author of "*The Cross and Crucifixion*" commented that:

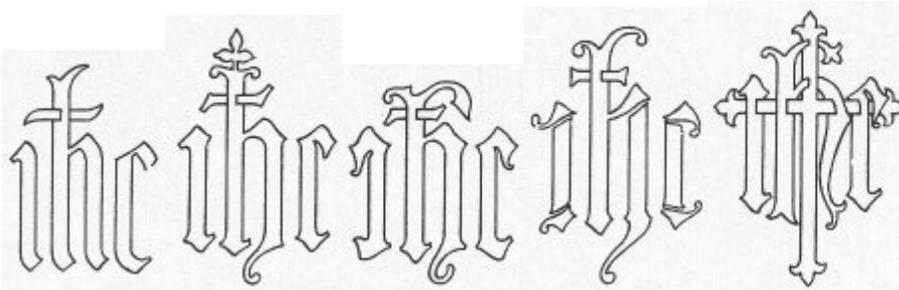
- the description of Jesus' suffering during the last hours of life indicates that he was crucified on a stake rather than a cross.
- that some of the writings of the early church fathers confirms the use of a pole.
- that the very earliest depictions of Jesus' crucifixion in Christian art show him on a stake.

Acts 5:30 refers to "*hanging him on a tree.*" **1 Peter 2:24** says "*He himself bore our sins in his body on the tree.*" **Deuteronomy 21:23** stated that a person hung on a tree was be cursed by God. This verse was a major stumbling block that prevented many Jews from accepting Jesus as Messiah.

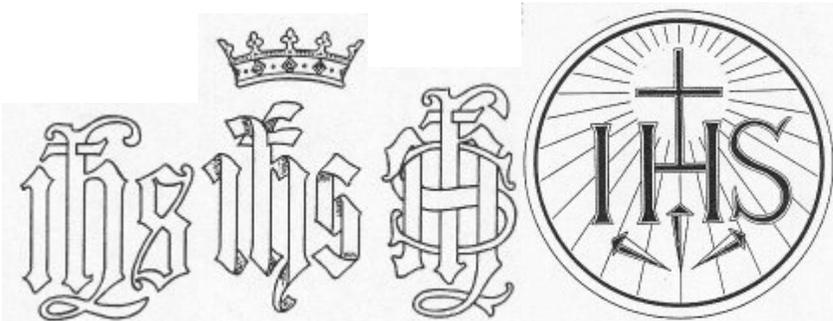
IHS



The letters IHS are a monogram of the word *Iasous*, which is Greek for "Jesus." Never write the letters with periods after them. Please note, when writing the last symbol the *contraction* sign (line over the letters) must be written to denote an abbreviation, or shortening, of the word.



These first monograms are written in the old greek IHC vs. the newer IHS below.



The Alpha and Omega



The first and last letters of the Greek alphabet which signify that Jesus is the beginning and the end of all things. See the Book of Revelation, chapter 1, verse 8.

Sources:

<http://home.rochester.rr.com/gocek/images/christn/>
http://www.religioustolerance.org/chr_symb.htm
<http://www.bright.net/~gray0013/symbols/symbols.html>