

Christianity without Crucifixion in the Early Church

By Nick Gier, Professor Emeritus, University of Idaho (ngier@uidaho.edu)

Paradise, not crucifixion, was the dominant image of early Christian sanctuaries, and paradise was this world, not the next. What the images said was that God blesses this world with the spirit.

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

In July of 2002 Rita Brock, a Disciples of Christ minister, and Rebecca Ann Parker, President of Starr King Theological School, 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. When Jesus is shown on the Cross in these early centuries, he is very much alive and looking straight out into the world.

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. Curiously but significantly, there was no depiction of the Crucifixion.

In the churches of Bishop Cyril of Jerusalem 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. 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 at baptism. 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. In contrast 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 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.

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."

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. Interestingly enough, Carolingian church authorities imprisoned and tortured 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 many innocents on the way. In the centuries to come it would 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: *Saving Paradise: 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."

Nick Gier taught religion and philosophy at the University of Idaho for 31 years.