

# Can You Identify

Luke 23:24; Acts 7:59-60 NIV

Reading through Luke's history of the Way, in the early stages, the Church meeting from house to house as well as in some of the synagogues was welcome. But, it didn't stay that way. In the first few centuries of the Church, it wasn't always safe to identify with believers. And yet, as we see today where followers of Jesus are considered targets for all sorts of abuse and persecution, the Church continues to meet and thrive.

One of the ways the early Church used to spread the Gospel, pass messages, or identify contacts in unfamiliar cities or villages was the *ichthus*; the fish symbol.

Although not mentioned in the New Testament, and not knowing the exact origin of it's beginning, this symbol became an identifier of believers that is still seen today.

Did the identifying symbol come from Jesus making Galilean fishermen 'fishers of men?' Or possibly the multiplication of loaves and fishes to feed the crowds; or the commonly used literary acrostic using *ichthus* to form the message, 'Jesus Christ, God's Son, Savior?'

Don't think about it too long. Just say yes to all the above. It all works, but we really don't know.

So, with this identifier, a believer could travel to an unfamiliar town and know if

other believers lived in the area, if this symbol could be found scratched on a wall or paver.

I read that sometimes only half the symbol would be used – an unimportant scratch until completed by another follower of Jesus. However, caution was still in order. A Roman soldier or a Saul of Tarsus could be watching for the symbol to be completed.

Think of all the trademarks and symbols used as identifiers today. Instead of using words on a billboard, an apple with a missing bite, or golden arches, are all that is necessary. As well know as these two identifiers are, as well know as many others are today, none compare with the longevity and identity of the Christian Cross.

As much as we would like to believe that the Christian Cross symbolized salvation to everyone, the Cross is not without its dark side: Crusaders killing Muslims; Catholic inquisitors rounding up European unbelievers; or individuals like Hitler eliminating the 'Christ-killer' Jews.

On the bright side, the Cross had its part in ending the English and American slave trade, is currently working to end the sex-slave trade, and continues in relief effort around the world from everything from disaster relief to clean drinking water. More that just a marketing tool in the mission field for the Church back home, a

piece of jewelry on a chain, or a tattoo on an individual, the Cross should be an identifying symbol of the death and resurrection of God's only Son. However, for that to be the case, those individuals that claim the Cross as an identifier, whether on the mission field or at home, need to be people of the cross. The world will not be impressed with anything less. Can you identify...?

God designed us to be social creatures. Have you noticed that? There are those individuals that like to be alone and choose to hermitlike, but, for most of us, we like to belong; to be a part of...something.

For example: it could be sports. My mother was a die-hard Reds fan. If the Reds were on TV, when you went to visit, you enjoyed the Reds game. Didn't matter if they were winning or losing, it wasn't over until the last out.

Her sister, Reba, lived in Michigan. If Ohio and Michigan were in competition, whether football, basketball, whatever, when the game was over, one or the other was receiving a telephone call. Ways to identify, all in good fun.

But, not all the ways we humans choose to identify can be called good. Racial, geographical, sexual; the list is way too long.

Unfortunately, these identifiers are learned at an early age. Lets stay in the area of sports for a while longer. Does any kid ever get used to being the last one chosen for the team on the playground? Leaving the area of sports...

Academically, I cringed every time the class would have a spelling Bee. We would line up around the room in two teams...did anyone else live this nightmare...one of the first ones to return to your seat. Today I praise the Lord for spell check. Can you identify...?

Socially I was kind of shy; had a slight stuttering problem. Didn't like to be teased. Who does? Right?

Then why would a person who didn't like to be teased join in teasing another? And it went beyond teasing. [The girl's name was Ella.] She was big for her age, and not a good dresser. She became a target in the playground. I don't remember the girls teasing her, but there was a group of boys that showed no mercy. I remember joining in. I also remember how bad I felt after I did, especially after mom drove me past where she lived. I couldn't believe it. Our chicken coupe looked like it was in better shape.

Our social dark side involves clichés, gangs, mobs; we can dress it up and call it a band of brothers, but, whether it is in a schoolyard or on the streets of a city, our colors identify. The goals become the same. The schoolyard game of follow the leader has become serious business.

One major problem in society today is bullying. This is nothing new. Bullies have been around for a long time. However, when weapons began showing up in schools, it was past time to take notice. Some states have passed laws addressing the issue. Hopefully, they will be effective.

Again, bullying is nothing new. Its time to turn to the Book of books, and we can find plenty of examples.

At the end of the Record of Genesis, the book of firsts, we read about the death of Joseph:

**<sup>24</sup> Then Joseph said to his brothers, "I am about to die. But God will surely come to your aid and take you up out of this land to the land he promised on oath to Abraham, Isaac and Jacob." <sup>25</sup> And Joseph made the Israelites swear an oath and said, "God will surely come to your aid, and then you must carry my bones up from this place."**

**<sup>26</sup> So Joseph died at the age of a hundred and ten. And after they embalmed him, he was placed in a coffin in Egypt. (Genesis 50:24-26)**

In the next Record, called Exodus, God makes good on his promise in his own unique way.

In the next few generations after Joseph, the Israelites grew in number and became a threat, so he thought, to the Pharaoh. So, before they became too powerful, he enslaved them.

**<sup>12</sup> But the more they were oppressed, the more they multiplied and spread; (Exodus 1:12)**

When that didn't work, the Pharaoh gave an order to the Hebrew midwives to kill the baby boys at birth.

**<sup>17</sup> The midwives, however, feared God and did not do what the king of Egypt had told them to do; they let the boys live. (Exodus 1:17)**

When that failed to work, the Pharaoh gave orders to throw the baby boys in the Nile. That should do it. That should keep the Israelites from becoming too numerous and powerful.

This really threw God a curve, didn't it? You know what is coming next. A Hebrew bay boy is found floating in a basket and raised by the Pharaoh's daughter. But, God didn't stop there. Listen to this.

The baby boy's sister was watching the basket being lifted out of the water.

**<sup>7</sup> Then his sister asked Pharaoh's daughter, "Shall I go and get one of the Hebrew women to nurse the baby for you?"**

**<sup>8</sup> "Yes, go," she answered. So the girl went and got the baby's mother. <sup>9</sup> Pharaoh's daughter said to her, "Take this baby and nurse him for me, and I will pay you." So the woman took the baby and nursed him. <sup>10</sup> When the child grew older, she took him to Pharaoh's daughter and he became her son. She named him Moses, <sup>[b]</sup> saying, "I drew him out of the water." (Exodus 2:7-10)**

God used the oppressors of his people to raise, educate, and protect Israel's deliverer.

In the book of Esther, even though God's name is not mentioned, we can see his providence. Kings and authorities can make their rules, but God can overrule and accomplish his purpose.

The king promoted a man by the name of Haman over all the nobles. He became the most powerful official and apparently, became a legend in his own mind. All the nobles bowed to him except Mordecai. He already had the true God that he bowed to, and refused to be bullied by Haman. When Haman's vanity became bruised, he plotted not only to get Mordecai, but his people as well. He didn't know that this also included Queen Esther.

Through all the twists and turns in the story, Haman ends up being hanged on the gallows he had intended for Mordecai. It's beginning to sound like God doesn't care much for bullying. Can you identify...?

A few centuries later, we read about Peter and John butting heads with a group called the Sanhedrin. They were the political and religious lawmakers and overseers of the Jewish people. This prestigious group ordered Peter and John to keep quiet about Jesus. Their response:

**“Which is right in God's eyes: to listen to you, or to him? You be the judges! <sup>20</sup> As for us, we cannot help speaking about what we have seen and heard.” (Acts 4:19-20)**

No beatings or bullying would stop Peter and John from preaching Jesus. They defied the orders of the Sanhedrin, obeyed God rather than man.

Every generation struggles with this choice. There will always be those who don't like the idea of people under them obeying God rather than them. Authoritarians have went so far as to come up with the idea of 'the divine right of kings.' They argued that if a man was made king, God made him king, and he was to be obeyed like God himself.

This didn't go over too well with groups like American revolutionaries, who believe that God gave man certain rights that nobody, kings or anyone else could bully away.

Well, what does all this have to do with the cross? What does bullying and identifiers have to do with Jesus sacrifice and resurrection?

God has a much better way to win friends and influence people than bullying, branding, or segregating. Even though he knows that he is right, he has a better way to govern than to throw his weight around. And that way is the way of the cross-not the self-serving way, but the self-giving way.

The cross was God reaching out to sinners-those like the Pharaoh's, the Haman's, the Sanhedrin's, and all those they oppressed, to reconcile, to build a bridge of self-giving rather than self-serving. The supreme example was God's own Son.

The day Jesus was crucified, everyone involved, from the crowd shouting crucify him, to Pilot who washed his hands of it, to the laborer who dug the hole, was flat guilty-no exceptions. And yet, we hear words from the cross, from a man so badly beaten, it's a wonder he could even speak;

**“Father, forgive them, for they do not know what they are doing.” (Luke 23:34)**

But, preacher, that was Jesus. He was not only a man, he was also God. And that's what he came to do. I don't think I could forgive people who treated me or a member of my family so unfairly.

And as far as the bullying goes, you don't know what I go through at work just to keep my job. You don't know what it's like going to school with those people. You don't have to live with my wife.

You are right. I don't know what you go through at work; or at school; and I don't have to live with your wife. But, I do know what it is like to forgive people who you really don't feel like forgiving. It's a choice. You can't rely on your feelings. If Jesus would have followed his feelings, we would be lost in our sins.

As far as Jesus not just being a man, and forgiving from the cross-one more illustration and I'll quit.

See if you know who said this from Acts:

**“You stiff-necked people! Your hearts and ears are still uncircumcised. You are**

just like your ancestors: You always resist the Holy Spirit! Was there ever a prophet your ancestors did not persecute? They even killed those who predicted the coming of the Righteous One. And now you have betrayed and murdered him— you who have received the law that was given through angels but have not obeyed it.” (Acts 7:51-53)

That was part of Stephen’s speech to the Sanhedrin. Listen to what else he said:

While they were stoning him, Stephen prayed, “Lord Jesus, receive my spirit.”<sup>60</sup> Then he fell on his knees and cried out, “Lord, do not hold this sin against them.” When he had said this, he fell asleep. (Acts 7:59-60)

A man, Stephen, while being unjustly treated, prayed for the bullies, just like the Son of Man did on the cross. Can you identify...?