

Discussion Questions for *The Mystery of the Cross* **By Judith Couchman**

As you read *The Mystery of the Cross*, use these questions for reflection or small-group discussion. I've included one question for each chapter. Each chapter is short: about four pages long. If you form a weekly study group, you could study the book in seven weeks to correspond with the seven parts of the book.

Before You Begin (Introduction)

1. What draws you toward reading/studying a book about the cross?
2. What do you expect from this book?
3. Do you harbor any reservations about this topic?
4. After reading the introduction, do you resonate with the author's desire to explore images of the cross? Why, or why not?

Part One: Ancient Echoes of Christ (Chapters 1-4)

1. At the end of chapter 1, the author writes, "It's an idea I've pondered: Before Jesus appeared, the pre-Christian cross foretold his arrival." Do you agree or disagree with this statement? Why?
2. Chapter 2 describes how the Copts (early Egyptian Christians) adopted the pagan *ankh* as their Christian cross. What is your opinion of this practice? Explain.
3. Look at the image of the healing cross on page 28 (chapter 3). Do you feel this is an effective healing symbol for our culture? Why, or why not?
4. After describing Christ's suffering in chapter 4, the author asks, "What do we offer to Christ in return?" How would you answer this question?

Part Two: The Pain and the Glory (Chapters 5-9)

1. Chapter 5 presents images of early Christians shouldering their crosses. What can we learn from these images?

If someone created an image of you shouldering the cross, what would it look like?

2. Why would some early Christians want to pass along a story that connects the rod of Moses to the cross of Christ (chapter 6)?

What is your image of the Good Shepherd?

3. In addition to what you read in chapter 7, what evidence indicates that Christ is “King of All”?

4. Chapter 8 discusses images of Christ as the “Man of Sorrows.” Why might this be an important image to early Christians?

How does it speak to you?

5. Why is the "Descent from the Cross" a crucial image for Christians to ponder (chapter 9)?

Part Three: Early Signs of Faith (Chapters 10-16)

1. Two thousand years after Peter and other apostles, how are Christians still “crucified with Christ”?

What does “being crucified with Christ” mean to you (chapter 10)?

2. In the manner of early Christians in chapter 11, how can you increase your “cross senses”?

3. Why do people mock Christ's cross? Consider early Christianity through today.

At the end of chapter 12, the author asks, “Should contemporary Christians defend the mockery?” What is your answer?

4. After reading chapter 13, do you think an Easter (Pascha) celebration could incorporate whimsy? Why, or why not?

5. Consider the prayer stance of the *orans*, on page 42 (chapter 14). When a Christian prays with outstretched arms, what does this mean to you?

6. After reading chapter 15, do you think “signing the cross” should be part of Christian worship today? Why, or why not?

7. On page 94 (chapter 16), the author claims: “In our culture images of the cross appear so frequently, we barely notice. At the same time we often don't feel God's love, forgiveness, or presence. Could our cross consciousness and spiritual perceptions be cause and effect?” How would you answer this question?

Part Four: The Great Conversion (Chapters 17-21)

1. Chapter 17 tells the story of Emperor Constantine and his vision of a *Chi-Rho* cross before a crucial battle. How can symbols of the cross cultivate faith?

2. Based on chapter 18, why would earlier Christians place so much emphasis on the “True Cross”?

What is your opinion of this practice?

3. What could a cross staked in the desert represent about the spiritual life (chapter 19)?

How could the cross speak to you when you're in a spiritual desert?

4. Chapter 20 features Celtic crosses. Through the centuries many people have felt drawn to these crosses. Why do you think this is so? What might be their spiritual message?

5. According to chapter 21, when people groups converted to Christianity, their old beliefs and practices mingled with the new. How does this occur in our culture?

In your opinion, when is this acceptable? When is it not?

Part Five: Daily Signs of Salvation (Chapters 22-26)

1. Chapter 22 explores ancient oil lamps with crosses. How might they inspire and guide you?

2. Based on what you read in chapter 23, how do you hope for the cross to appear in your life? Why?

3. Do you believe the cross can protect you from harm or keep you from fear (chapter 24)? Why, or why not?

4. What do you think the cross represents to non-Christians today (chapter 25)? Explain.

5. According to chapter 26, why did crosses appear on the coins for the Roman Empire?

Do you think this parallels American coins that say, “In God We Trust”? Why, or why not?

Part Six: Ways to Worship (Chapters 27-33)

1. Chapter 27 discusses the origin of the basilica church. For you, does it (or would it) make a difference in your worship to attend services in a cross-shaped church? Why, or why not?

2. In chapter 28 read the quotes from Clement of Rome and Dietrich Bonhoeffer on page 150. How would you summarize their insights to following Christ?

What is your response to this advice?

3. In Chapter 29 reread the quote on page 155: “Blessed are those who, placing their trust in the cross, have gone down into the water.” Why does trusting the cross lead to baptism?

What are the blessings for those who've been baptized?

4. Based on chapter 30, why is bread a powerful symbol for the spiritual life? For Christ's crucifixion? Give examples.

5. On page 163 from chapter 31, the author claims, “The cup demanded so much, not even Jesus wanted to drink it.” What does the communion (Eucharist) cup require of us?

6. On page 166 from chapter 32, the author states, “More power inhabits an honest, satisfied spiritual life than owning the world's greatest treasures.” Do you agree with her? Why, or why not?

How could this statement affect church life?

7. What can the iconoclasts and iconodules from Chapter 33 teach us about “the peaceable power of Christ's cross” (chapter 33)?

Part Seven: Enduring Mysteries (Chapters 34-40)

1. Chapter 34 describes how early and medieval Christians traveled to visit the site of the Holy Sepulchre. Why would spiritual pilgrims need to visit the physical place of Christ's crucifixion and burial?

Do you believe these locations are more holy or miracle-provoking than ordinary places? Explain.

2. Based on chapter 35, how could the ecumenical attitude of Cuthbert and the crosses of the *Lindisfarne Gospels* be applied to your world? Give examples.

3. After reading chapter 36, do you think grace and spiritual sanctuary should be unlimited? Why, or why not?

How could you offer grace and sanctuary in your life?

How do you need these mercies for yourself? Be specific.

4. Chapter 37 describes how an early Christian liturgy helped Sabbath worshipers bring their “hearts up” to the Lord. How can we “bring our hearts up” in everyday life?

5. In chapter 38, how did the veiled cross enhance the meaning of a Good Friday service?

How can we bring similar meaning to our personal worship throughout the year?

6. Chapter 39 compares worldly kingdoms to God's kingdom, citing the Beatitudes in Matthew 5:3-10. Read this Scripture passage again. Which beatitude do you live by most easily?

Which beatitude is the most challenging for you to grasp? Why?

How can you move toward living by God's kingdom?

7. Chapter 40 emphasizes how the human spirit can rise up and recover from setbacks, sufferings, and disappointments. In what areas of your life do you need to "live again"? How can you begin?