

Centre Congregational Church, United Church of Christ

May 1, 2022

The Rev Dr Scott Couper

“Chi Rho”

Christian Scripture: Romans 8:31-39

Symbols are meaning-makers. And humans crave to make meaning. We strive to make meaning because we want to communicate. And humans want to communicate because we are relational. We need symbols to make meaning, to communicate, and thus to be in relationship.

So, let's communicate this morning. In this sermon series on Christian symbols, we seek to deepen our relationship with one another and with God by understanding several prominent symbols of our faith. Today, we will learn about 'Chi Rho' as a symbol of Christ Jesus.

I am thrilled to find that we have the symbol Chi Rho displayed beautifully in one of our church's stained-glass windows (rear right, as one faces the organ). Chi Rho often is often set between two other symbols, Alpha and Omega. The 'A' and 'O' symbols symbolize the 'beginning' and the 'end' of time. So, right-off the bat, we can glean that Chi Rho is about the Universal Christ and not necessarily about the human 'Jesus' (as Jesus was born and died and hence can't be the beginning and the end).¹

¹ Richard Rohr, *The Universal Christ: How a Forgotten Reality Can Change Everything We See, Hope for, and Believe* (New York, NY, 2019).

I believe it is helpful to make this distinction between 'Jesus' and 'Christ'. (I am sure all of you are aware that 'Christ' is not Jesus' name!) Richard Rohr once wrote that "Christ is the eternal mystery of matter and Spirit as one".² Matter, plus Spirit, equals Christ. Richard Rohr also once wrote that "Christ is a name for the transcendent within every 'thing' in the universe".³ Such an inclusive definition of Christ is not some sort of new age Christology. This understanding of Christ is ancient and it is articulated by John's gospel wherein the Christ (*Logos*) is that "through which all things came into being, and not one thing had its being except through [the Word]" (John 1:3). So, 'Christ' is more inclusive than 'Jesus'. 'Jesus' is the perfect incarnation of 'Christ'. So, 'Jesus' is the perfect marriage of Matter (or flesh) and Spirit, and hence is often referred to as 'Christ'. Yet, the 'Christ' includes more than the corporal 'Jesus'. Therefore, this morning's message is about the Christ and its symbol Chi Rho, and not about Jesus *per se*. [We will get to Jesus when we focus on the Cross.] The symbols Alpha and Omega on either side of the Chi Rho signals that it symbolizes Christ.

² Richard Rohr, "Christ Is Risen", Sunday, February 10, 2019. Found at: <http://cac.org/christ-is-risen-2019-02-10/>, accessed May 2, 2022.

³ Richard Rohr, "Another name of Every Thing", Tuesday, February 12, 2019. Found at: <https://cac.org/another-name-for-every-thing-2019-02-12/>, accessed May 2, 2022.

Also, found in *The Universal Christ*, 5.


Other definitions of Christ in *The Universal Christ* are: "the immense spaciousness of all true Love", the "infinite horizon that pulls us from within and pulls us forward too", and "another name for everything – in its fullness", 5.

Chi Rho is an 'X' and 'P' superimposed on one another (sometimes the P is centered in the X and sometimes it is a part of the X at an angle). In Greek capital letters, Christ is spelled 'X-P-I-C-T-O-C'. 'XP' is 'Chi Rho' in the Greek alphabet. 'XP' is an abbreviation, or more accurately, a contraction, of 'Christ', much as 'BR' would be for 'Bruce', 'MA' for 'Mary', or 'EM' for 'Emelio' and hence is a monogram. Because Chi Rho is a contraction, there should be a horizontal line, called a *vinculum* to show that the contraction is an abbreviation.⁴ (The Chi Rho in our church does not include a vinculum and thus perhaps we may need to ask the Deacons to add one.)

In this sermon series, you will notice that I deconstruct, and then construct, meaning. I believe that we often have to unlearn what we have been taught in order to learn anew, more accurately. It is not at all a surprise to anyone here that the United States has been for centuries, and to a large extent still is, predicated on white supremacy. This is clear from the treatment of Native Americans, Asians, Blacks, and virtually all people of color. Hence, education in the United States, at best, ignores, and at worst, denies, that our country's historical narratives intentionally affirm white supremacy. That which is known as 'Critical Race Theory' (which is actually only taught in graduate law classes) has for some reason been made controversial and is now the newest chapter in our country's 'culture

⁴ McGee, Ratha Doyle, *Symbols: Signposts of Devotion* (Nashville, Tennessee: The Upper Room, 1962), 36-37.

wars'. Critical Race Theory deconstructs previously assumed histories in order to present new, and usually more accurate, histories. It is nothing worth going bananas about. This is the on-going work of all disciplines: to improve on the past and contribute to new more informed and accurate understandings. So, let us unlearn and learn again.

Many people rightfully are repelled by Christian symbols. And we here might be repelled by Chi Rho because it has historically has been used a logo for violence. According to the ancient historian Lactantius, the Roman Emperor "Constantine (r. 306-337AD) had dreamt of being ordered to put a 'heavenly divine symbol' (Latin: *coeleste signum dei*) on the shields of his soldiers. The description of the actual symbol chosen by Constantine the next morning closely resembles a Tau-Rho or a staurogram (), a similar Christian symbol. That very day Constantine's army fought the forces of Maxentius and won the Battle of the Milvian Bridge (312), outside Rome".⁵ Even if this story is mythical and inaccurate, the Chi Rho symbol was in fact used by Constantine as part of a military standard (*vexillum*) [...] known as the 'Labarum'.⁶

We need not delve into ancient history of the post-Constantine Roman state to learn of the violent history of Christianity. We know of Christian militarism

⁵ "Chi Rho", *Wikipedia*. Found at: https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Chi_Rho, accessed May 1, 2022.

⁶ "Chi Rho", *Wikipedia*. Found at: https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Chi_Rho, accessed May 1, 2022.

during the Crusades of the Middle Ages. We read of it during the Spanish and Portuguese genocides and enslavement in Latin and South America. We read about it even now during the modern era when imperialism and colonialism went hand in glove with Christianity. I am currently reading a Master's dissertation about the Congregational Church's views of mission in the Middle East during the early 1820s. The Reverend Sereno Dwight preached at an ordination service in Boston for commissioned missionaries in which he affirmed "The musket and the cannon may indeed prepare the way...If the arms of Russia and Austria, shall be directed toward Constantinople; no one can hesitate as to the result. The overthrow of the Turkish empire, and the deliverance of European Turkey, would they only open that country, but the whole of Western Asia, to every Christian invader".⁷ For twenty years in South Africa, I studied how the Dutch Reformed Church used Christianity to envision and justify *apartheid* and thereafter back it up with violence.

Friends, as people of faith, we intentionally learn and re-learn history not to hate ourselves as Christians. No. We do not learn about the Crusades, and even about how our own New England Congregational ancestors participated physically

⁷ Sereno Dwight, *Address to the Palestine Missionary Society at the ordination of Rev. Daniel Temple and Rev. Isaac Bird as Evangelists and Missionaries to the Heathen* (Boston: Croker and Brewster, 1822), 45. Found in: Philip Crossman, "The Vicarious Crusaders: New England Missionaries in the Ottoman Empire and the Early American Image of Islam", submitted in partial fulfillment of the requirements for the degree of Master of Arts, Vermont College of Norwich University, Montpelier, Vermont, 1993, 93.

and theologically in the genocide of indigenous Americans, in order to divide us from our indigenous citizens and our Muslim neighbors. No. Friends, 'Critical *Religious Theory*', if we might call it that, does not foster hate and division. Oppressed peoples already know what was done to them. No! We participate in Critical *Religious Theory*, just like we might be open to 'Critical Race Theory': so that we can come to this table with knowledge, understanding, love, sensitivity, and with greater sincerity and integrity. With Critical Religious and Race Theory we repent, we reconcile, and we restore relationships. Is that not what we as Christians are supposed to do?! I thought so.

Critical *Religious Theory*, just like Critical Race Theory, can be redemptive. Here in our sanctuary is a Christian symbol, Chi Rho, that was a standard placed on shields that led conquering warriors to other lands to invade and occupy. Can we sit around this table and, at best, ignore, and at worst, deny, its history and consume the bread of life and the cup of salvation with any integrity and not acknowledge that a key aspect of our Christian faith is repentance for the past?

Friends, the Christian faith is the most important influence in my life. I love and cherish this church and you, its people – just as I do the United States. Yet, for us to embody our faith, for us to share a meal at this table through the presence of Jesus in the bread and the wine, we must reclaim for ourselves the meaning of Chi Rho as a symbol of Christ's love. Christ must not communicate violence. Christ

must not communicate military victories. Christ must not communicate colonialism and imperialism. Chi Rho must no longer be used as a weapon, not in the Ukraine and Russia (as it is now), not in Iraq and Afghanistan, not in United States' courts, schools, or fifty-yard lines.

What is Chi Rho for us today? The Apostle Paul in Romans perhaps said it best: Christ Jesus our Lord is the one who reconciles us and binds us to the love of God. Chi Rho is the symbol of the Christ who prevents suffering, and even death, from separating us from the love of God. May we show that same love to the world.

This was the word of God. And it was preached to the people of God. And the people of God responded, "Amen".