

The following is a sample of the type of newly written material that will be periodically emailed to Rick Renner Readers. These are fresh glimpses into some of the studies that Rick Renner is presently writing that are soon to be published.

## **Assembling Together in Secret Amidst a Hostile Culture**

*Rick Renner*

The ever-present threat of arrest and prosecution often drove early Christians to find creative ways to obey God's command to *hold fast* to their faith while living in the midst of a hostile and dangerous pagan culture. One method they used was to communicate with each other using secret imagery that pagans didn't understand.

### **Secret Codes of the Early Church**

An example of this secret communication was a special symbol that believers in Asia would often scratch into the marble pavements of public places. This symbol essentially looked like a circle with a series of intersecting lines at its center, somewhat resembling an eight-spoked wheel.

To the eyes of Roman soldiers and government officials, these drawings looked like mere children's games that had been scratched into the pavement — but to believers, this symbol was actually a secret code. If one separates the lines from the circle, one finds that this symbol is actually composed of five Greek letters — **ΙΧΘΥΣ** — that overlap one another. In Greek, this sequence of letters is *icythus*, the Greek word for *a fish*, but to Christians, these letters hidden within the circular *icythus* symbol conveyed so much more.

The word **ΙΧΘΥΣ** is an acronym for Ἰησοῦς Χριστός, Θεός Υἱός, Σωτήρ, which means: **Jesus, Christ, God, Son, Savior.**

- “**I**” is the first letter (*Iota*) of Ἰησοῦς — which is the Greek name **Jesus**.
- “**X**” is the first letter (*Chi*) of the word Χριστός — which is the Greek word for **Christ**.
- “**Θ**” is the first letter (*Theta*) of the word Θεός — which is the Greek word for **God**.
- “**Y**” is the first letter (*Upsilon*) of Υἱός — which is the Greek word for **Son**.
- “**Σ**” is the first letter (*Sigma*) of the word Σωτήρ — which the Greek word for **Savior**.

Soldiers and political officials might have thought this symbol was a mere street game, but in reality, it was a secret code designed to help believers connect with each other and coordinate meetings. For instance, if it was scribbled next to a shop, it might have conveyed that the shop owner was a Christian. If was drawn next to a home, it might have indicated that a Christian gathering was secretly being held there. Wherever this symbol was inscribed, it sent the message that believers were nearby.

## **Secret Meeting Locations Above and Below Ground**

When Roman authorities began to pass laws restricting the public and private gatherings of Christians, it quickly became difficult for believers to find safe locations where they could worship together in peace. Although there were periods of reprieve in different regions of the empire in the early centuries of the Church, it generally became completely illegal for Christians to come together anywhere in the Roman Empire — including the privacy of their own homes. Those who were caught doing so often faced severe reprisal. These restrictions put believers in a difficult position. Although Scripture instructed them to obey, honor, and pray for the authorities of the land (*see* Romans 13:1,2), their government wouldn't permit them to obey God's commands.

As the new laws took effect, Christians found themselves being forced to choose between obeying the law of God or following the law of man — just as Peter and John had to decide whom they would obey when the Sanhedrin commanded them to stop preaching in the name of Jesus (*see* Acts 4:19). When Roman or local laws were in line with God's law, early Christians diligently obeyed them. But if a law conflicted with the principles clearly outlined in God's Word, most believers chose to obey God over the government's mandates. This choice was not without consequences, however, because it gave rise to accusations that Christians were insubordinate law-breakers.

An example of how God's law put early Christians at odds with man's law can be found in Hebrews 10:25, which commands believers not to forsake the assembling of themselves together. Once the Roman government passed a law forbidding unauthorized gatherings — which included members of this upstart Christian sect — this verse put believers in direct opposition to the law. Consequently, they were often driven to assemble in secret meetings, which they often disguised to look like something else. Using emblems like the circular *icythus* symbol, believers were able to covertly communicate where they lived or worked with each other — and by regularly changing the place and time of their meetings, they made it difficult for authorities to catch them.

Congregations rarely met at the same place for long, choosing instead to constantly move to new secret locations in order to avoid detection. Church meetings in the First Century were mostly conducted in private residences, and just like today, the homes of believers could come in all sizes. Some dwelling places were quite modest, whereas others were large enough to accommodate a small congregation. In Acts 20:7-12, we read of a boy who fell from a window of a third-floor apartment where Paul was preaching to a local congregation. This reveals that even apartment buildings could be appropriated for church use if the circumstances were right.

One example of a home that was secretly used for church purposes was the residence of the apostle John. The Early Church leader Irenaeus recorded that during John's residence in Ephesus, the elderly apostle lived in a secluded community situated on a hill above the Temple of Artemis. Because his home was located on the outskirts of the city, it was beyond the notice of Roman authorities and thus a safe environment for visiting church leaders who came from across Asia to commune with him. If John had lived in the heart of Ephesus, these visits would have been a far

more noticeable, complicated, and dangerous affair. To quote *A Light in Darkness, Volume One*, “It is simply a fact that a higher level of toleration was extended to people living outside the city limits because their refusal to conform to local standards wasn’t as obvious. John, along with a very small community of believers, lived on top of the nearby hill where they could avoid the constant pagan pressures that existed inside the city of Ephesus. These early believers had learned through hard experience that the authorities were more concerned with in-town residents who violated Roman law or the emperor’s edicts for all to worship him.”

As the years passed and demonic forces continued to mount against Christians, they were often forced to become even *more* covert about the locations of their meetings. For example, in the mid-Second Century at the trial of Christian leader Justin Martyr, he stated to the Roman magistrate that he had been living and conducting meetings in a room located above a bathhouse in Rome. He said, “I live above one Martinus, at the Timiotinian Bath; and during the whole time (and I am now living in Rome for the second time) I am unaware of any other meeting than this. And if any one wished to come to me, I communicated to him the doctrines of truth.

Since Roman bathhouses were notorious cesspools of sinful activities, it might seem highly unusual that a respected church leader like Justin Martyr would choose to live above one — much less meet with other Christians there for purposes of teaching or corporate worship. However, the strategic potential of such a meeting place should be considered. This may have been an ideal covert location for Christian gatherings simply because it *was* such an unlikely possibility.

Another place believers sometimes met in secret was in suburban cemeteries on the outskirts of the cities. These were considered ideal meeting places because they were largely hidden from the eyes of hostile governmental authorities. Then by the Second Century — and some scholars believe there is evidence for as early as the late First Century — believers began to use underground catacombs for the burial of their dead. (Christians never cremated their dead because they believed in the physical resurrection of the body.) Although there were few rich Christians in the earliest years of the Church, later some wealthy Christian landowners granted permission for underground tombs to be built on their land. These eventually came to be called catacombs, but originally they were referred to as *dormitories* (Greek: *koimaein*), because they were viewed as resting places where the bodies of Christians were kept while they awaited the resurrection. Some of the larger rooms in these underground chambers became another means used by early believers to assemble together in secret.

The catacombs, lined with niches that held bodies of martyred brothers and sisters who awaited resurrection, were constructed deeper and deeper into the ground. The tunnels crisscrossed each other in every direction, both horizontally and vertically. These complex underground systems of tunnels were so extensive that the catacombs in Rome alone are calculated to encompass more than 375 miles.

Rome’s catacombs are found along *Roman roads*, such the [\*Via Appia\*](#), the [\*Via Ostiense\*](#), the [\*Via Labicana\*](#), the [\*Via Tiburtina\*](#), and the [\*Via Nomentana\*](#). But catacombs have been discovered throughout the former Roman Empire. Tertullian mentioned their existence in Carthage (see Scap., 3.1 = CSEL, 76, page 11) and commented that early congregations collected “communal

funds” to pay for the proper burial of believers at these sites (Tert., *Apol.*, 39.55-6 = CSEL, 69, p. 92). Origen also wrote of their existence in Alexandria (Hom. In Jer., IV.3.16 = SC, 232, p. 264-265).

Especially during periods of fierce persecution in the Second and Third Centuries, these underground catacombs sometimes provided an effective “cover” for Christian meetings because they gave the impression that these believers were merely a group of people gathered for a funeral ceremony. In fact, at times actual funerals became legal opportunities for Christians to gather.

Roman soldiers were superstitious about the dead and were afraid to enter the catacombs, so some of the larger chambers in these underground systems became ideal locations for believers to meet on occasion without fear of authorities watching what they were doing. Deep beneath the earth, those burial quarters would be transformed into places for worship, testimony, and the teaching of God’s Word — a place where believers could strengthen each other’s faith before reemerging into the sunlight.

Evidence of Christian gatherings in catacombs exists in abundance. On the walls of catacombs are sketches, drawings, paintings, and engravings of the apostles; Jesus carrying a lamb across His shoulders, scenes of the Last Supper, the cup of the Eucharist, Jonah and the whale, the multiplication of bread and fishes, lambs, doves to represent the Holy Spirit, and much more. In addition to these early artistic renderings, thousands of fragmental inscriptions are carved on the catacomb walls, attesting to the lives of the Christians who were buried there.

But even these Christian burial grounds came to be officially forbidden to believers. In 258 AD, the Emperor Valerian forbade Christians to enter their cemeteries to hold prayer meetings, which may have been the root cause for the imperial prefect in Alexandria strictly forbidding believers to hold assemblies or to even enter cemeteries. The prefect proclaimed, “It shall by no means be permitted you or any others either to hold assemblies or to enter into the so-called cemeteries.”

Because of the hostile forces arrayed against the Church during the first three centuries of its existence, it was a matter of survival for early believers to find concealed places where they could meet to worship, hear God’s Word, and fellowship with one another. Often in the late hours of the night, they met covertly in homes, apartments, cemeteries, tree groves, remote locations outside city limits, and even in catacombs to avoid the detection of local authorities — not so different than the way the Church operates today in countries where governments are hostile to the Gospel. Although these believers had no choice but to communicate and meet with each other in secret, their clandestine activities contributed to the growing tide of accusations against the Christian community mentioned earlier, such as cannibalism and sexual debauchery.