



That Little Fishy Thing



(by Lance Bailles)

You've seen it on bumper stickers, business cards, and baseball hats. It's that little fishy thing, that's right, the one that sometimes has those funny looking letters on it. To many people, it has become as much a symbol of Christianity as the cross itself. But what does it mean? What are those funny letters? And, what difference does it make?

There's a name for the little fishy thing: *Ichthus* (pronounced "ick-thoose"), which is a Greek word for "fish," and is the one and same word spelled by those five funny looking letters that often appear on that symbol: ΙΧΘΥΣ. Those five letters, in turn, each stand for five words that confess our Lord: "Jesus Christ, God's Son, Savior."

We don't know when all this got started, but it was already well established both in the East and the West by the latter half of the second century. By that time, the fish was appearing on sarcophagi, rings, seals, and catacombs used by Christians, and the earliest direct evidence for "the fish" with its accompanying letters is from slightly before the year A.D. 180 in the eighth Sibylline Oracle (SibOr 8.217).

That explains the when, but not the why. This does: Somewhere around the year A.D. 200 an influential writer named Quintus Tertullian wrote a short treatise on baptism for the benefit of those who were studying in preparation for it at his local church. In this, he makes the remarkable observation that "we as little fishes, in accordance with our ΙΧΘΥΣ (ick-thoose: fish) Jesus Christ, are born in water" (On Bapt. 1). So, the little fishy thing is a confession of Christ, but it confesses Christ as a symbol of new birth in the water of baptism. In fact, the baptistery itself used to be called a *Piscina* (fish pond) by the Latin writers in those early days.

Here's why this is worth knowing. Most of the people who decorate their T-shirts with that little fishy thing don't believe that baptism in water is necessary for the remission of sins. Yet, they proudly display the very symbol that confesses the necessity of water in being born again.

(copied from *Guardian of Truth* - edited)