

The Sign of the Cross and the Crucifix

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Even if, indeed, the Old Lutheran Church has a different doctrine in her ceremonies than the Roman Church, isn't she showing that she is closer to the Roman Church than other Protestant denominations, since she has preserved ceremonies mitigating against God's Word – since they are ceremonies used exclusively by papists? Thus muses the *Watchman of Zion* in Baltimore. Mr. Weyl [in the pages of that publication] asserts this. He writes: "Making the threefold cross over a baptized infant, mounting a crucifix in the Church and burning wax candles on the altar in daylight at the holy Lord's Supper, etc., doesn't that reek of Rome?" ...

The first rite of our church that is supposedly papistic is the rite she uses so often, called "making the sign of the cross." Now it's certainly true, this ceremony is seldom used nowadays, since even many of the servants of the Church are ashamed of the crucified Son of God, so now even naive, honest Christians, who only see this done when they're around Catholics, come to think it's a badge designating a vassal of the pope. But we ask, why could it not be an innocent ceremony, when such a lovely message is so clearly given to everyone by it? Even if it were admitted that this ceremony was not put into practice until after the papacy ascended, wouldn't we still have to say it's a very lovely and edifying rite to anyone who believes in the crucified Savior, who loves him and, therefore, gladly wants to remember him?

Yet whoever is even slightly familiar with the history of the Christian Church must know that this beautiful, meaningful ritual is ancient. It far predates the rise of the papacy, yes, it had even been a common practice in the age of Christianity's first love, in the age when even hundreds of thousands died as martyrs for the Crucified. Already the first doctor of the Church after the apostolic fathers, Justin Martyr, makes mention of this Christian custom in his second letter of defense in the days of the church father, Tertullian, who was born in the year 160. Making the sign of the cross was so universally practiced that he [Tertullian] could write: "Step by step, every time they came in or went out, when putting on clothing and shoes, upon waking, eating, lighting lamps, laying or sitting down, in short, in all our daily activities, we make the sign of the cross upon our forehead" (*Lib. de corona militis* c. III.). One of the things this same Tertullian writes, in giving the details of the rites used with Baptism, is this: "The flesh is signed (with the cross), by which the soul is guarded" (*De resur. Camis*. Ch. 8). From this we see that even in the time of Tertullian the sign of the cross was put into service, not only in common life, but also in the Church. And, of course, at that time it had no tie to any superstitious ideas that in the sign of the cross itself lay some magical power as it was later taught in the papacy and is still taught. To the charge that heathen of those days leveled against Christians, that they worshiped the cross, Tertullian responds: "Whoever among you thinks that we worship the cross takes refuge in the same principle we do. Wood is wood. A figure does not obliterate its distinction from what it depicts" (*Apolog. c.* 16).

So, according to that, what must you say about Lutheran preachers and writers of newspaper articles who disparage making the sign of the cross as being papistic? Aren't they themselves branding a most innocent rite, and a lovely, simple sign for the remembrance of the crucified Savior, as an abomination? Aren't they turning the Christians in the golden age of Christianity, along with many thousands of holy martyrs, into superstitious papists? Doesn't the Lutheran Church have the right, as no reasonable person can deny, to preserve innocent rites that have remained in the Church, even from the ancient, good times, even through the rule of the papacy – and how may she, then, do away with the sign of the cross, this loveliest of all symbols,

that only a believer can have? Yes, says Mr. Weyl, “the time for child’s play is over and the worship of God in spirit and truth is ordained for us.” We respond: We truly do not begrudge this man his childish and ridiculous thoughts about responsibility and the Spirit. Yes, we much rather pity him as an unsaved man who ought to be ashamed of his own explanation of the childishness of what is simply Christian (cf. Mt. 18.3).

But perhaps another might say: Shouldn’t the Lutheran Church abolish making the sign of the cross, since it is used so much by papists in service of their superstitions? We reply: Abuse must not eliminate a proper use. The true Reformation was not the elimination of all existing ceremonies, but the purification of what was good from abuses and of false accretions according to the apostolic rule: “Test everything and retain what is good!” It doesn’t say to abolish, but “retain.” But as to why the Lutheran Church retained just this designation, we will let the great Lutheran theologian Johann Gerhard explain. He writes thus:

The sign of the cross is made upon the forehead and the breast of the child (to be baptized). This is not done out of superstition, nor for the sake of its supposed supernatural power, but this is to bear witness that the baptized is received to grace and born again unto eternal life through the service of the crucified Christ alone. By this we are also reminded that the child is being received into the number of those who believe in the crucified Christ, that the old Adam in him must be crucified daily through Baptism, Rom. 6.6, and that he will be subject to the cross in this life. According to Genesis 48.14, the patriarch Jacob similarly formed a cross when he laid his hands upon both of his grandsons, Ephraim and Menasseh, reminding them of the cross of Christ. Here we also include that some elders did this on the foreheads of the servants of God in Ez. 9.4 and Rev. 7.3. Christ the crucified was once foolishness to the Gentiles 1 Cor. 1.23. That is why they mocked Christians, calling them cross worshipers (*crucicolas*), as Tertullian witnesses. Christians designated themselves in that way to show that they were not ashamed of the cross of Christ, placing the same in the middle of their forehead. Cyril of Jerusalem writes (*Catech.* 13): “Do not be ashamed of his cross. If you want to dispute with unbelievers, then first make the sign of the cross with your hand... It is the sign of faith... Do not deny the Crucified, or the whole host of the witnesses of his crucifixion and his suffering will rise up against you, even the stones which are still visible, which were split at the death of Jesus.” Augustine writes (*Serm. 8 de verb. Dom.*) “The wise people of the world mock us because of the cross of Christ and say: What are you thinking, honoring a crucified God? The cross is signed upon the forehead, which is man’s disgrace, etc.” Therefore when catechumens (who had registered to be baptized) give themselves over to the crucified Christ, their forehead and breast is signed with the cross, as a sign of faith and confession of Christ. The sign of the cross comes from the baptism of catechumens, as do most other ceremonies, and is carried over to the baptism of infants. (*Loc. theol. Bapt.* § 261)

Gerhard writes in another passage,

Can forming the sign of the cross over the bread and the cup (in the holy Lord’s Supper) be disapproved? Answer: This is a free ceremony if it is used as a sign of the blessing and consecration, but it is to be ascribed absolutely no spiritual power, [yet]...by it, the remembrance of the cross of Christ is renewed – that is, the suffering of Christ on the cross, which is the fount of all blessing – just as the laying on of hands in the Absolution and [in] ecclesial ordination is used as an external sign. Even Chrysostom (*Horn. 55. in Matth.*) and Augustine (*Tract 118 in Joh.*) mention that the sign of the cross was used back then at the celebration of the holy Lord’s Supper. (*Loc. th. S. Coena.* § 156)

Hopefully this will be sufficient to convince any objective person that nothing is less papistic than making the sign of the cross...

A second practice of the Old Lutheran Church which must lead to Rome, according to Mr. Weyl's judgment, is "the mounting of a crucifix in the Church." To this charge we must first remind you that, by all means, the Lutheran Church has, from the beginning, also distinguished herself from the Reformed Churches by doing this – as she has permitted images, altars, crucifixes, etc., in her houses of worship – while ever since the days of Carlstadt's smashing statues, the Reformed Churches have, for the most part, rejected them...

...the Lutheran Church gives so little attention to images that they [i.e. Lutherans] don't think such external things are worth disputing over; she merely asserts she has the freedom to use them, and therefore she does not disdain them when they may also serve as a God-pleasing reminder, or as an appropriate, external adornment for public worship. ... Now since, on the part of the Reformed, they often want to accuse Lutherans of sinning since they have *allowed* images, altars and crucifixes and the like in their Churches, as they charge this as being papistic, yes, idolatrous – as this, for example, is done in the Heidelberg Catechism – then using or not using these images has taken on a significance beyond what it is in and of itself. That is, since now they have made images a matter of conscience for Lutheran Christians, then between Lutherans and the Reformed it is no longer a matter involving poor, innocuous images, but rather it impacts the high article of Christian freedom, the legitimate understanding of the divine law, the proper distinction between the Old and the New Covenants, and therefore, whether a Christian ought to allow something God has not forbidden to be called sinful. ... Whoever considers this rightly will not wonder when faithful servants of the Lutheran Church still advocate their congregation's adorning their Churches with images, with a crucifix, an altar and the like. They do this primarily so that, even in this way, God's Word is preached and the places where the congregation of the faithful gather invite their devotion, even externally. But they also do this – and, indeed chiefly do this – so that a public witness be constantly laid down for the freedom of the Christian in all matters not forbidden by God.

So now this brings up another question: Is the use of images, crucifixes, altars, etc. really a matter that is part of Christian freedom? The Reformed deny this and with this they have always appealed to Ex. 20.4-5 where, in the midst of the enumeration of the Ten Commandments, it says: "You shall not make any image or any likeness, neither of that which is above in heaven nor that which is under the earth, nor that which is in the water under the earth." In order to emphasize these words the Reformed have even declared that this is a separate, that is, the Second Commandment (so the Reformed number four Commandments on the first table and six Commandments on the second; they combine the Ninth and Tenth Commandments, on coveting, or lusting, into one Commandment). So the Reformed say: Isn't it clearly forbidden here to make images? We answer: Yes! But what kind of image is forbidden is also stated in this addition: "Do not worship and serve them." That these words must be applied to the word "make" and must limit the same, we see from the 23rd verse of this Chapter where the LORD declares: "Therefore you shall not make anything next to me, you shall not make gods of silver or gold." These Words clearly and plainly show, first, that vs. 4 and 5 are not a separate, Second Commandment, but rather an explanation of the First Commandment; and, secondly, that God only forbids making images for worship, as images of idols, in vs. 4 and 5. This is stated so naturally and obviously that it seems inconceivable that anyone on the side of the Reformed could have raised a doubt against it.

Yet the Reformed might object: Those words: "Do not worship them, or serve them," stand on their own. It doesn't say "You shall not make them so that you worship them." But even this objection dissipates into nothing when we compare this to Lev. 26.1. There the LORD says: "You shall not make any idols, nor an image, nor any pillars, nor any memorial stones in your land, which you worship. For I am the LORD, your God." Here we have God's own – thus an irrefutable – sure explanation of this addition to the First Commandment (Ex. 20.4,5). But his divine explanation tells us that making images and having them is only forbidden when it is done

“that they be worshiped.” Now this also follows from Lev. 26.1, that erecting pillars and setting memorial stones is forbidden, from which it is clearly seen that merely making these things could not be forbidden, but rather making them to worship, for who could deny that they had been allowed to raise pillars and to set memorial stones? This is even more clearly seen in the following passage, Deut. 4.15-19. In this passage God even places next to the prohibition of making images “lifting your eyes to heaven to the sun, moon, stars and the whole host of heaven.” Now wouldn’t it be ridiculous to assert that according to that [prohibition] it is sinful to look up into the heavens and the stars? Certainly [this would be ridiculous]. Everyone sees that here [the] only looking [that] could be forbidden [is that looking] which is accompanied by a veneration of these creatures, as it also says at the conclusion of this passage: “and fall down and worship them and serve them.” But now if the only kind of idolatrous gazing into the heavens and its stars that is forbidden is idolatrous [gazing], then this also applies only to the idolatrous making of images on earth. So from this it’s clear that in the holy Ten Commandments, merely making and using images is not being forbidden. From other passages of Scripture and from the nature of this matter this is clear and self evident. ...

So is it really indisputably beyond doubt that God’s Word allows one to make, possess and use images? First we must point out that we Christians, who live in the New Covenant, are no longer bound to the civil and ceremonial laws of the Jewish people with their shadows and types (Col. 2.16-17), but rather only to their moral ethics. But this ethic is nothing other than the natural law that has been written by God in the heart, of the eternal, immutable norm of his will. Therefore we find [that] if God himself has done something or commanded it, it can’t be anything forbidden by moral ethics. But...God himself has had images made, sometimes by commanding it and sometimes by affirming them being made.

According to Ex. 25.40 God himself had made and shown Moses an image of a model of the tent of meeting. Further, according to Num. 21.8, God himself had commanded that an image of a snake be made and, according to Ex 35.30f, God filled Bezeel and Ahaliab with his spirit for the very reason to equip them with gifts for all sorts of artfully working with gold, silver and bronze, and the like. According to Ex. 25.18 God had arranged for them to make figures of cherubim and to even place them in the Holy of Holies. Here we also include the images that were found in the temple of Solomon, of cherubim, lions, cattle, pillars, flowery adornments, pomegranates and the like in 1 Kings 6.7. Now none of this, even if it were not specifically ordered by God, is offensive to God as he bears witness. For at its dedication he wondrously filled this temple that was adorned with all sorts of images with his glory, 1 Kings 8.11. So who could now declare that it is forbidden to do what God himself has done and commanded to be done, or has affirmed? It cannot possibly be against the moral precepts buried in the heart of every human being, so obviously, without doubt, it must also be allowed for a Christian of the New Covenant. ...

So it is also only fair that our Mssrs. Reformed along with their lackies, Mr. Weyl in Baltimore and all the other non-Lutherans, calm down a bit when they hear that we Lutherans have images, crucifixes, altars, etc., not in order to offer sacrifices and the like, but rather merely as adornments and as pious reminders.

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