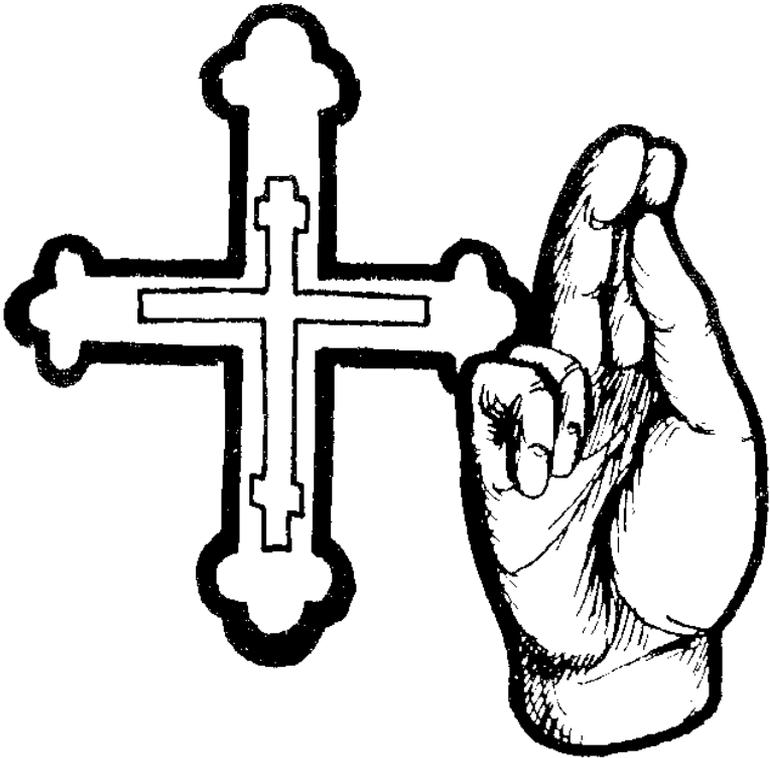

THE SIGN OF THE CROSS

ITS HISTORY, MEANING, AND USE AMONG LUTHERANS
(AND IS IT OKAY FOR LUTHERANS TO DO THAT?)



*"For I determined not to know anything among you except
Jesus Christ and Him crucified."* I Corinthians 2:2

THE SIGN OF THE CROSS

Its History and Meaning Briefly Stated

Lutheran liturgical scholar, Paul Lang notes:

Crossing oneself was practiced by Christians from the earliest centuries and may go back to apostolic times. We know that it was already a common ceremony used daily in A.D. 200, for Tertullian writes: "In all undertakings – when we enter a place or leave it; before we dress; before we bathe; when we take our meals; when we light the lamps in the evening; before we retire at night; when we sit down to read; before each task -- we trace the sign of the cross on our foreheads." St. Augustine (A.D. 431) speaks of this custom many times in his sermons and letters.

Lang also remarks:

It is one of the traditional ceremonies that was most definitely retained by Luther and the Lutheran Church in the 16th century Reformation. Luther prescribed it in his *Small Catechism* under the heading: "How the Head of the Family Should Teach His Household to Bless Themselves in the Morning and in the Evening." He says, "In the morning when you rise (In the evening when you go to bed) you shall bless yourself with the sign of the holy cross and say: In the name of God the Father, Son, and Holy Ghost. Amen." Again in his *Large Catechism* he recommends that parents should instruct their children to cross themselves for the purpose of recalling their divine Protector in moments of danger, terror, and temptation. This ceremony is also still authorized in many present-day Lutheran service books [*Ceremony & Celebration*, p.71f].

Although Roman Catholics make the sign of the cross, they do not have a monopoly on the practice. *The sign of the cross is not a uniquely Roman Catholic practice.* It is shared by Christians who maintain something of historic Christian piety and liturgical practice. As pointed out above, the sign of the cross is a practice continued by Luther, and prescribed by him in the *Small Catechism* and other writings. In that respect it is entirely Lutheran and well-within our heritage from the Reformation and before.

To be sure, there are some who make the sign of the cross in an empty or superstitious manner – still, the abuse of the practice does not negate its proper use. For some the sign of the cross can also become an outward show of piety to others, a work of self-righteousness. The sign of the cross is also abused if it is used in that way. *Whether done in an empty way, a superstitious way, or in a self-righteous way, the problem in such cases is not with the gesture but with the attitude or motive of the person practicing it.*

The basic meaning of the sign of the cross is derived from Holy Baptism (hence Luther's connection with the Triune invocation of God's name). In the Baptism Liturgy the pastor makes the sign of the cross "*both upon the forehead and upon the heart*" to mark the candidate for Baptism as "*one redeemed by Christ the crucified.*" Hence the sign of the cross is a way of remembering one's Baptism into Christ the crucified and the blessings that come through Him (Romans 6). That is its most basic meaning and that is how Lutherans interpret it in an evangelical (Gospel) way. **Since it is neither commanded nor forbidden, Christians may or may not use it in freedom in a churchly way.** It is not something to be condemned.

St. Paul the Apostle exhorts us to "*pray without ceasing.*" The sign of the cross assists our prayer in a physical way so that we may remember that Christ is our help in every time of need and that we are baptized into Him. In Holy Baptism we are joined to our Lord in His death, burial, and resurrection. In general, the sign of the cross is made to acknowledge that all of our faculties (mind, heart, and soul) and all of our strength (shoulders) are being dedicated to the service of God in the cross of Christ, through Holy Baptism as well as the other means of God's grace in Christ alone. Our bodies are temples of the Holy Spirit.

Sometimes a physical gesture or postures help us to focus our mind for what is at hand and upon God's Word. Bowing, kneeling, folding one's hands, not to mention the sign of the cross, help us to focus our body and soul for prayer and worship, especially in the context of the Divine Service of Word and Sacrament, but also in our personal and family prayers. We worship "in Spirit and Truth" the Word who became flesh and made His dwelling among us. And so our worship of the Triune God is inseparably physical and spiritual. In a Christian view, these two cannot be separated. God made us physical-spiritual beings (Gen. 2).

HOW & WHEN IS THE SIGN OF THE CROSS DONE?

The sign of the cross is simply done by holding the first two fingers and the thumb of the right hand together at their tips, and with the fourth and fifth fingers folded over the palm together. Then, with the fingers so joined, the forehead is touched first (“In the name of the Father”), then the chest (“and of the Son”), the right shoulder (“and of the Holy...”), and finally the left shoulder (“Spirit. Amen.”). Meanwhile, the head and shoulders are slightly bowed as a sign of servanthood to the Blessed Trinity. This is the most ancient way, which mirrors the sign made by the pastor in blessings. Some Christians go to the left shoulder first.

The thumb, index finger, and middle finger joined symbolize the Holy Trinity while the two remaining fingers symbolize the two natures in Christ (that He is true God and true man). The movement from right to left is understood to mean that salvation passed from the Jews, who were at the right side of God (the side of honor, belonging to the chosen people) to also the Gentiles, who were at His left, *or as Paul says, the promise is for the Jew first and then also for the Gentile.*



THE SIGN OF THE CROSS IS CUSTOMARILY DONE AT THESE TIMES:

- + Upon entering and leaving the nave of the church (at the door or pew)
- + During the Invocation at the beginning of the Divine Service
- + Upon receiving Holy Absolution in general or private confession
- + At “*and the life of the world to come*” in the Creed
- + Upon receiving the body and blood of the Lord in the Eucharist
- + At the words “*deliver us from evil*” in the Lord’s Prayer
- + At a blessing, Benediction or Dismissal from the altar
- + Before beginning personal and family prayers
- + At the words, “*help, save, comfort and defend us*” in the **Kyrie/litany**
- + During “*make haste, O God, to deliver me*” in Matins and Vespers
- + Whenever it is a helpful reminder of Christ and one’s Baptism

Note: During the Divine Service, when the Holy Gospel is announced, one may also make a “triple sign of the cross” on the forehead, lips, and heart. This smaller cross at this point is made with the hand closed, using the tip of the thumb, upon the forehead, lips, and heart, since the Gospel sanctifies our minds, our mouths, and our hearts in Christ’s forgiveness. This is also done at the opening versicles of Matins and Vespers.

The sign of the cross is a voluntary bodily reminder of our salvation in Christ alone, and by grace (a gift) alone. As such it can be a visible proclamation of what Lutherans believe, teach, and confess. †