The new Shofar

The classical doctrine of the mission as God the Father sending the Son, and God the Father and the Son sending the Spirit [is] expanded to include yet another "movement": Father, Son, and Holy Spirit sending the church into the world.

David Bosch

TRINITY

The Sign of the Cross – a Trinitarian mini-creed

Trinity Sunday is always a challenge for preachers. The main reason is generally the density of trinitarian theology. It is a mystery, and our limited human imagination struggles to make sense of what God has self-revealed. For me the Trinity is something in which I find myself drawn. I cannot explain it satisfactorily. I just live it and celebrate it. The oldest trinitarian statement of faith is the sign of the cross, a declaration of faith around since the very first days of the Church.

Jesus transformed the cross into an image most treasured — an icon of the Holy Gospel itself. To sign the cross is to recall or announce the gospel of Jesus' victory for us over sin, death and the devil. That is why the custom is so ancient and universal.

The sign of the cross is a ritual hand motion usually accompanied by the trinitarian formula from **Matthew 28:19**: *In/into the Name of the Father, and of the Son, and of the Holy Spirit*. For Anglican, Lutheran, Orthodox, and Roman Catholic Christians (or about 80 percent of the world's Christians), the motion symbolises the Cross of Calvary by tracing the shape of the cross in the air or on one's own body. It brings to mind the fact that the name of the Triune God had been placed upon us when we were adopted into the Lord's family through Holy Baptism (in which, as St. Paul says in **Romans 6.3-6,** we are united to Christ's cross and resurrection). In these established traditions of the Christian faith, the sign of the cross affirms the grace and mercy of God on account of "Christ and him crucified" (**1 Cor. 2:2**).

The Sign of the Cross in Church History

The sign of the cross' antiquity also adds to its catholicity. It was in general use long before the cross or crucifix was present in worship or church buildings. However, these symbols are also found etched in gems of jewellery or graffiti form during the second century. St. Cyprian (**AD 210-258**) and many other early Church Fathers are witnesses to the use of the sign of the cross among the earliest generations of Christians. Given its universality in the late 100s, some scholars believe it was in use within the living memory of the Apostles themselves. Tertullian (c. **AD 155-220**), for example, writing at the end of the second century, testifies that: *At every forward step and movement, at every going in and out, when we put on our clothes and shoes, when we bathe, when we sit at table, when we light the lamps, on couch, on seat, in all the ordinary actions of daily life, we trace upon the forehead the sign.* Elsewhere, he positively identifies the sign*: We Christians wear out our foreheads with the sign of the cross*. The sign of the cross, according to the earliest centuries of Christians, is "*the sign of the Lord*," and every baptized Christian was "marked" with it.

The Sign of the Cross in Scripture

In the first centuries of Christianity, the cross was traced by believers with the thumb or finger on their own foreheads. The baptismal rite of *The Apostolic Tradition of Hippolytus of Rome* (**c. 215**) preserves an even older second-century practice that required pastors to seal the sign of the cross on the foreheads of newly baptized. This practice was derived from references in Holy Scripture, notably **Ezekiel 9:4; Exodus 17:9-14**; and especially **Revelation 7:3**. For these first generations of Christians, it was particularly the Revelation texts (including **Rev. 9:4** and **Rev. 14:1**) that were understood as the fulfillment of Old Testament prophecies, and that connected the crucifixion, the name of God, and baptism into one sign — the Holy Cross. To sign the cross, then, was to confess the blood of Christ in the atonement, in the New Covenant, and in the font into which they were baptized. More simply, it said: *I have been crucified with Christ* (**Gal. 2:20**).

The sign of the cross is rooted not only in the Old Testament but also in the New Covenant in which the *Church* is Israel reconstituted on account of Jesus' crucifixion and resurrection. St. John wrote in Revelation of those who have the sign of God in their foreheads stand out in distinction from those who have the sign of the beast in their foreheads: the baptised in Christ versus those who are not so marked. When we undergo the Sacrament of Holy Baptism the priest "seals" the sign on our foreheads and hearts, saying, *receive the sign of the holy cross upon your ✠ forehead and upon your ✠ heart to mark you as one redeemed by Christ the crucified* (*Lutheran Service Book*, 268). What we do today in our *Lutheran Service Book* was already long ago elaborated upon by St. John of Damascus, who wrote, *The holy cross was given to us as a sign on our forehead, just as circumcision was given to Israel: for by it we believers are separated and distinguished from unbelievers*.

What we are doing when we make the sign of the cross is recalls this seal and confessing the invocation that is said while making this holy sign calls on our God— Father, Son, and Holy Spirit—and is, therefore, a sign of our belief. Indeed, it serves as both a "mini-creed" that asserts our belief in the Triune God into whose name we were baptized (by the blood of Christ but also into the blood of Christ). Thus, it is a line of demarcation between those who belong to Christ and those who do not yet. The sign of the cross stands akin to the truth of our salvation rather than to the deceit of superstition.

Signing the cross, therefore, stands at the foundation of our children's Christian heritage and lends itself to a participatory, even unified, act of worship among all the baptized, no matter what age.

Luther the great figurehead of the Reformation, and for the Church of England Archbishop Thomas Cranmer both maintained the sign of the cross. Luther purposed to see to it that all children of the Reformation were liberated to worship the Lord in this most meaningful and dignified expression of faith and devotion. Consequently, he encouraged the signing of the cross with the invocation in his directions for morning and evening prayer within the *Small Catechism*. There Luther writes: *In the morning, when you get up, make the sign of the holy cross and say, 'In the Name of the Father, the Son and the Holy Spirit. Amen.' … In the evening when you go to bed, make the sign of the holy cross and say*….