

# The Sign of the Cross: Tethered to Our Baptism

Jennifer L. Lord

In the span of twenty-four hours my husband and I, independently of one another, marked our friend's forehead with the sign of the cross. Neither one of us knew the other had done so. But an ambulance call and emergency surgery led us each to do the same thing for our friend, to spontaneously mark her by this ritual gesture.

We were away from home together to attend a conference. At 3:30 A.M. our hotel room phone woke us; our friend was in pain and asked us to come to her room. She knew my spouse is an ICU nurse (though at the time we didn't know the ICU part would be helpful). He assessed her; the hotel placed the ambulance call; we decided he would accompany her to the hospital and I would stay behind for the conference work. The crew came to her room with the gurney, and together we descended to the hotel lobby and out to the winter dark. As the crew lifted our gurney-bound friend into the ambulance, I stood at her side and reached up—I was convicted to do so (you are a pastor; this is what you do)—making the sign of the cross on her forehead, saying something like “The Lord bless you and keep you and bless all those who will now care for you.”

Only a few days later, after the emergency surgery and recovery that allowed her to return for the end of our conference, did she mention that my spouse, too, had made the sign of the cross on her forehead. He did so as she was being wheeled into surgery. He also kissed her on her forehead. She's a woman religious and laughs when telling that part of the story. But I heard her

say (and she's permitted me to share all of this) that when hospital personnel asked if she wanted a chaplain she said no because she had been ministered to already by our signing the cross, by our accompaniment.

Here are some things, then, to say about this account: the cross sign was meaningful for all of us. The cross sign was portable (we weren't in church; we were on a city street and outside the surgery unit). And our two instances of cross signing were but the most recent occurrences in our friend's whole lifetime of making and receiving that gesture. Repeating it as we did tapped into its cumulative effect; those instances of that gesture referenced all the other times she had made and received this sign. And our use of the sign was an ecumenical gift; we represent three ecclesial traditions: Orthodox, Roman Catholic, and Presbyterian.

Harold Daniel's article on the sign of the cross, which is foundational to this essay, orients those of us in the Protestant Reformed tradition to the Judeo-Christian origins of this gesture and how it has been employed throughout history in different Christian traditions. While Scripture does not *literally* mention signing with the cross, the

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“At every turn, at our going-out and coming in, on putting on our clothes and shoes, on washing, on kindling a light, on going to bed, on sitting down, and at every act, we mark our brow with the sign of the cross.”

—Tertullian

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origins are evident in several passages. Daniels speaks about a mark on the brow (for better or for curse!): Genesis 4:15; Ezekiel 9:3ff; Revelation 7:3–4; 9:4. Of course we do not know exactly if or how these scriptural references shaped what Tertullian describes at the end of the second century, but we do have that apologist's word on the subject: “At every turn, at our going-out and

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coming in, on putting on our clothes and shoes, on washing, on kindling a light, on going to bed, on sitting down, and at every act, we mark our brow with the sign of the cross.”<sup>1</sup> The writings of several fourth-century church fathers, Saints Cyril of Jerusalem, Basil, Chrysostom, and Augustine, confirm the prevalence of this gesture in their time.<sup>2</sup> It makes sense that early Christians made the sign of the cross because they were being taught to understand their lives defined by the dying and rising of Christ (Mark 8:34; Matt. 16:24; Luke 9:23; Gal. 2:19–20, 6:14; Col. 2:12; Phil. 2). The gesture of the sign of the cross is exactly this: marking ourselves to proclaim that we belong, in life and even when death comes, to the crucified Risen One. Against all that would assail and sway us, we belong to the triune God, and in this God we are given true life. It is not a magical sign just as prayer is not a

shall proclaim your praise.”<sup>3</sup> Marking the cross on the body is a sign of union with Christ, a means of witnessing to the faith in all manner of situations and a means of reinforcing faith.<sup>4</sup> But this seems like a big leap for so many faithful today. Why would we do this? Is there really a need or a purpose? Is it not blatantly Roman Catholic ceremonial excess from which we were freed by the reforming efforts of our sixteenth-century forebearers?

Years ago one of my teachers made this simple statement: “Liturgy is the Christian life in ritual form.” My Reformed ears at that time were still trying to tune themselves to language about rite and symbol and ceremonial action. But eventually I began to hear the verbs of worship and I recognized them as the things I’d done my whole cradle-Presbyterian life: gather, greet, respond, pray, confess, forgive, sing praise, pray, read and listen, sing more and

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—Harold Daniels

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magic incantation; it is not our participation in a transaction in order to get what we want. But this gesture, like prayer, serves to realign and reorient us with the mercy of God, our hope in God, and God’s abiding presence.

And so Harold Daniels, years ago, invited readers to recover the use of the sign of the cross—to begin with that ancient form in which the presider (minister) uses a thumb to sign the forehead of the newly baptized with the cross. Daniels hoped that by reincorporating this post-baptismal signing (with optional anointing), it would again be imbued with baptismal meaning and, then, its meaning would be transferrable to daily personal use, perhaps even as Tertullian described. Daniels tells us, “Typical occasions of the use of the sign of the cross by the faithful include its use in confessing sin and receiving pardon, at the reception of bread and wine of the Eucharist, at the beginning of meals, and in private devotion. It is traditional to sign one’s lips at the beginning of morning prayer with the words from Psalm 51: ‘O Lord, + open my lips and my mouth

read and listen more, listen, sing, profess, lament, petition, intercede, share peace, return gifts, prepare the meal, return great thanks, process or pass, eat, share, pray, sing, send. And sometimes we include yet more verbs: prepare, teach, read and listen, present, promise, renounce, profess, pray and invoke, wash and name, welcome, and teach. Our corporate worship, the Sunday liturgy, is a very long list of verbs. “Worship is a human experience, not a set of concepts. It is a thing of beauty and warmth. It is a body-thing, not a head-thing.”<sup>5</sup>

And this list is not just any set of verbs. They are our verbs, our actions, because they are handed down to us—even commanded to us for our worship-in-the-beauty-of-holiness use. “The actions are essential: they have to do with Jesus Christ. In these things we encounter the full reality of who Jesus is and what he does, and who we are as one body in Christ.”<sup>6</sup> We can reduce the longer lists of verbs to baptizing, reading and preaching, praying, eating and drinking, gathering, and sending. The waterfall of verbs are commonly grouped even

more succinctly as gathering, word, meal, sending—all the verbs part and parcel and interacting with one another under the rule of a governing verb. Yet all of them are scriptural, all of Jesus, all for who we are and are to be in him, in God. Our worshiping actions are only possible because we are responding to what God has already done for us and continues and promises to do for us and for the life of the world.

And more: our responsive actions on Sunday morning shape us for the ministry of God's reconciliation (2 Cor. 5:18). We move about the world as forgiven sinners, greeting others, forgiving our own and others' commissions and omissions (committed voluntarily and involuntarily), and praying for our enemies even as we lament and intercede against all manner of evil. We move about being Christ's peace, praying and working that all may know God's abundant life that drowns death and sin and raises us anew, praying and working for food enough for all, living as covenanted signs of God's rule.

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Another way to say this is, of course, that our Sunday gatherings celebrate the reign of God in the spirit of the risen Christ. This is the rule under which we live, including its judgment of all that resists a uniting alignment to God's reign.<sup>7</sup>

The emphasis here is that we do this celebrating and daily living not just intellectually but by our bodily selves. There is no way around the fact that we are physical beings and we physically *do* these verbs and actions Sunday after Sunday, week in and week out, according to our abilities. Yet the Reformed tradition is shaped immensely by a textual focus, for better and for worse. Better because we insist on a scriptural hermeneutic: we must hear the word alongside any sign-acts. The worse because we came to associate worship with text: printed or (more recently) projected texts that we sing or recite. John Calvin certainly spoke

of ritual, symbols, and ceremony with caution. "Ceremonies were to be few in number, easy to observe, dignified in representation, and clearly reveal Christ. He regarded all ceremonies as 'corrupt and harmful' that did not lead people to Christ. He wrote, 'Ceremonies, to be exercises of piety, ought to lead us straight to Christ.'"<sup>8</sup>

While our sixteenth-century ancestors cleared out the excesses of ceremony, the absence, over time, of healthy, robust rites (including attention to symbols, gestures, postures, movement) has allowed for the supremacy of text. "Given the pragmatism, efficiency, technology and literalism of the culture we absorb and breathe and live, the problem which liturgy as a language of symbols presents to us is overwhelming."<sup>9</sup> So for some contemporary congregations a reintroduction of a gesture like the sign of the cross, small as it may be, is still a foreign language, utterly strange and suspect. For we are used to texts. Others in our tradition grew tired of our inherited textual focus and have turned their efforts to invention, creativity, new symbols and verbs. In these instances, the old rites and symbols and signs are largely deemed remote, incapable of holding meaning for our version of the world.<sup>10</sup> Either way, it's hard to imagine a recovery or renewal of some of these actions, let alone all of the verbs.

But what of this little sign of the cross? At this point we are not even considering the larger sign familiar to many whereby people cross their entire torso forehead to breast and shoulder to shoulder. We ask: What about this little sign marked on one's forehead? Does it really add to the way we understand our lives in God? In the language of the Reformation, this sign is *adiaphora*, an indifferent thing, a nonessential thing.<sup>11</sup> What are we to make of *adiaphora*, let alone the old central symbols of the faith? I think of one dependable liturgical encounter that helps me parse that question.

Because of family relations, and admittedly because of a desire to see and hear multiple Scripture readings set next to lavish sign-acts, I place myself in a decidedly non-Protestant assembly at certain times. In one particular Christian gathering, at twelve times during the year, everyone comes forward to receive the sign of the cross marked on the forehead with oil. These are festival occasions for which people line up surrounded by continuous singing. The blessing is made with a goodly amount of oil which drips over eyebrows and down noses and smudges eyeglasses, leaving more than a trace.

But this anointing is not a random act. Opportunity for another form of blessing comes every week when people line up to receive the words of blessing (no oil, no sign of the cross on the forehead) surrounded by singing. Because the people of this assembly are repeatedly blessed with the sign of the cross, they know the layers of connections—how this blessing is related to the anointing on Great and Holy Wednesday (Holy Unction), the chrismation of a convert to that ecclesial tradition and, at core, the chrismation bridging baptism and Eucharist.<sup>12</sup>

That last is the point of it all: this anointing and any sign of the cross refers back to baptism, to our watery belonging in Christ whose death conquers death and sin and who raises us to new life. Let any recovery of ancient Christian signs be informed by how those signs relate to the ways that we gather each week around Word and sacrament, praying, and being sent forth in service to all creation.

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To be clear, it needs to be said that the Reformers held a different theology than that of Roman Catholics and Eastern Orthodox Christians. The Reformers understood that the act of baptism, with water and the triune name, is our full Christian initiation in water *and* the Holy Spirit, no additional rites or gestures needed. For our contemporary practice this means that we understand the sign of the cross and the use of oil for that sign to be actions that assist the central meaning of initiation. In those other ecclesial traditions, the oil anointing/sign of the cross is necessary, for it is the seal of the gift of the Holy Spirit.<sup>13</sup> For persons in the Reformed tradition the cross sign with oil supports and assists the fullness of the lifelong meaning of baptism. It functions as a secondary sign; it is *adiaphora*. And any recovery of *adiaphora* must be in relation to the central things that we do: “Still, one should be careful with *adiaphora*. It is not that one can do whatever one likes with these matters, even leaving them out altogether. . . . Rather, one must ask how

these secondary matters are arranged, so to disclose and assist the things that are primary.”<sup>14</sup>

In the end, in this discussion, any use or recovery of secondary signs is related to the strengthening (or recovery!) of the central signs. It’s hard to know the meaning of these secondary signs when the reference is to something that is shrunken and “mummified.”<sup>15</sup> Any consideration of reincorporating the use of the sign of the cross must evaluate the strength and fullness of the central sign of baptism. This is worth the effort

because there is something still there, some power there, even in those shrunken, shriveled, dried up forms: bread as wafer, the breaking of the bread as a crisp and tidy crackle, the baptismal bath as a trickle of water across the head, the sprinkling as some drops that few can see or feel, the oil as a quick smudge to be wiped off at once, the laying on of hands as a pat on the head . . . and so on and so on and so on.<sup>16</sup>

Gordon Lathrop, who speaks to all of these things, shows us what “unshrinking” looks like.

The name in which we baptize needs to be much more than a formula or a ritual confession of faith. Our churches will do well to recover a process of teaching and formation that leads to baptism and flows from baptism for both adult and infant candidates. We need sponsors, mentors, or godparents, catechists or teachers, pastors and members of the local community who take with great seriousness their roles in accompanying those who are being baptized. We need to help each other be less afraid to speak about God and grace to those who have begun to be curious about the hope that is in us. Then we need to let the washing itself be a powerful event, mirroring in the force of its symbol and ritual at least a little of the huge consequence of its meaning. We need to make our pools larger, when we can. We need to keep water in our fonts or pools all of the time. We need actually to wash or immerse our candidates, loving them, helping them across the water. We need to clothe them, anoint them, give them burning lights, sign them with the cross, lead

them into the assembly, give them the holy food to eat and drink, talk with them of what happened to them, think with them of what we shall do together now to bear witness to God's mercy in the world.<sup>17</sup>

Let our portable, repeatable signs not be perfunctory or for pious show. But let them be additional, supportive means by which we are tethered to why we do them in the first place: the life we share with one another and the life of the world held in the mercy of God.

### Notes

1. Tertullian, *De Corona*, 3, quoted in Ludwig Eisenhofer and Joseph Lechner, *The Liturgy of the Roman Rite*, ed. H. E. Winstone, trans. A. J. and E. F. Peeler (New York: Herder and Herder, 1953), 95.
2. Harold Daniels, "The Sign of the Cross," *Reformed Liturgy & Music* 21.1 (Winter 1987): 40–41. Daniels cites St. Basil as claiming "that the practice had been given by the apostles themselves 'who taught us to mark with the sign of the cross those who put their hope in the name of the Lord.'" *De Spiritu Sancto*, 27, quoted in Mark Searle, *Christening: The Making of Christians* (Collegeville, MN: Liturgical Press, 1980), 36.
3. Daniels, 42.
4. *Ibid.*, 39.
5. Robert W. Hovda, *Strong, Loving and Wise: Presiding in Liturgy* (Collegeville, MN: Liturgical Press, 1976), 84.
6. Gordon Lathrop, *Central Things* (Minneapolis, MN: Augsburg Fortress, 2005), 29.
7. See Robert Hovda, "The Vesting of Liturgical Ministers," in *Robert Hovda: The Amen Corner*, ed. John Baldovin (Collegeville, MN: Liturgical Press, 1994), 213–233.
8. Daniels, 42.
9. Hovda, *Strong, Loving and Wise*, 73.
10. See Aidan Kavanagh, OSB, "Textuality and Deritualization: The Case of Western Liturgical Usage," *Studia Liturgica* 23 (1993): 70–77.
11. John Calvin, *Institutes of the Christian Religion*, ed. John T. McNeill, trans. Ford Lewis Battles, vols. 20 and 21, The Library of Christian Classics, ed. John Baillie, John T. McNeill, and Henry P. Van Dusen (Philadelphia: The Westminster Press, 1960), 3.19.7.
12. This anointing blessing occurs at Matins of Festal Vigils (at evangelical and Marian feasts) and is known to the author through the Slavic practice of the Byzantine Rite.
13. There is a complex history regarding anointing in relation to initiation, and this history should inform Reformed discussions regarding confirmation. See Maxwell E. Johnson, *The Rites of Christian Initiation: Their Evolution and Interpretation* (Collegeville, MN: Liturgical Press, 1999) and Nicholas E. Denysenko, *Chrismation: A Primer for Catholics* (Collegeville, MN: Liturgical Press, 2014).
14. Lathrop, 70–71.
15. Leonardo Boff, *Sacraments of Life, Life of Sacraments*, trans. John Drury (Washington D.C.: Pastoral Press, 1987).
16. Hovda, *Strong, Loving and Wise*, 74.
17. Lathrop, 63.

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