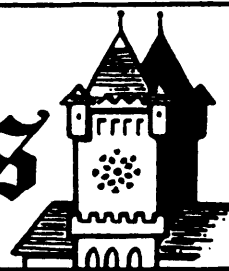


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LITURGICAL NOTES

by James B. Jordan

No. 4: How Biblical is Protestant Worship? (Part 1)

The goal of the Protestant Reformation was, in part, the purification of worship from pagan accretions. Principally, the Reformers believed, rightly, that the worship of saints, relics, and Blessed Mary Ever Virgin (BMEV) was superstitious. They also noted that the performance of worship (the mass) in Latin excluded congregational participation. Thus, their twin goals were to restore congregational participation, and to reform worship according to the standards of the Bible.

Inevitably, however, this reforming movement was corrupted by reaction. Anything that "smacked of Rome" was to be rejected. In part, this reaction was justified. To use an analogy: We know that there is no sin in the moderate use of alcohol. If a man is a drunkard, however, it may be necessary for him to fast from alcohol altogether (except in Holy Communion) for a period, until he acquires the maturity to handle it correctly. The danger is that he will develop a false understanding of why he is avoiding alcohol. Instead of seeing avoidance as a temporary fast, he may come to see alcohol as something evil in itself. This is, in fact, a common viewpoint in American fundamentalism: Alcohol is evil in itself. This perspective is fundamentally demonic and manichean, ascribing evil to God's good creation (1 Tim. 4:1-5).

Similar errors cropped up in Protestantism. If Roman Catholics kneel for prayer, Protestants will refuse to do so. If Roman Catholics celebrate the grace of God manifested in His gifts to the Church (saints and martyrs), Protestants will refuse to do so. If Roman Catholicism has a perverted theology of Mary, Protestants will take no notice at all of her. If Roman Catholics chant the psalms in precise translations, Protestants will either versify the psalms (losing much in the process), or stop singing psalms altogether. If Roman Catholics keep Christ nailed to the cross, Protestants will war against the cross altogether. If Roman Catholics have processions and street dancing, Protestants will reject all bodily expression in worship. If Roman Catholics use wedding rings, then Protestants (the Puritans and Anabaptists at least) will say it is sinful to wear a wedding band. And so it goes.

This is not Biblical fasting from an abuse. It is a perversion. Instead of getting their theology and practice from Scripture, Protestants have more often gotten them from reacting against Rome. As a result, many of the things that the Bible teaches about true worship have been lost in many Protestant churches.

The Regulative Principle

Most Reformed and Anabaptistic Protestants subscribe to the so-called "Regulative Principle of Worship." This prin-

ciple states that in worship, whatever is not expressly commanded in Scripture is forbidden. There are several problems with this, as I pointed out in "Christianity and the Calendar," No. 4 (available from *The Geneva Papers* upon request). First, no one is able to apply this principle without modifying it, because we find no Biblical grounds for church buildings, pews, etc. Second, this principle is almost always applied dispensationally, as if only the New Testament were allowed to teach us about worship. (The proper view is that the New Testament *modifies* Old Testament teaching and practice.) Another problem, which is obvious when one reads the literature coming out of these camps, is that this principle leads straight to a form of legalism. Instead of finding the large, overarching principles of worship in Scripture, and noting particulars in that context, we are enjoined to find explicit particular statements to back up every little thing.

For instance, the Bible nowhere commands us to keep a feast of the Incarnation at the Winter Solstice; therefore, we are forbidden to do so. People who argue this way do not have a problem with Wednesday night prayer meetings, even though these are nowhere commanded in Scripture either. More importantly, they overlook the whole Biblical theology of worship, festival, and time (as I have been explaining it in *The Geneva Papers*). Actually, Biblical teaching as a whole is quite favorable to Christmas as an annual ecclesiastical festival. Almost invariably, the real reason for doing away with Christmas is that "Rome does it." Thus, the authority of Scripture is replaced by the authority of Rome, an authority which functions by way of reaction against whatever Rome says and does.

Aspects of Worship

In the remainder of this essay, I wish to begin taking up several areas of Biblical teaching on worship which are generally ignored in Protestantism today, at least in Baptist and Reformed circles (which are the circles in which I live, and which constitute the large majority of people reading this essay). As I study Scripture, I find that Lutheran and Anglican churches are more Biblical in their worship, despite some problems. From my experience, though, I suspect that the Biblical foundation for what they do has often been forgotten.

By way of introduction, however, let me say that it is clear from Scripture that worship is acceptable to God even in the most humble of settings. An ignorant Arminian Pentecostal, trying to lead a Bible study in a home, and celebrating communion with saltines and grape juice, may very well be more pleasing to God than a learned orthodox Calvinist conducting worship in a Biblically-designed church, and using Biblical elements in communion. We all know this, and it is not at issue in this essay.

Rather, I am making two points. First, given the opportunity, we ought to improve our theology and our worship along the lines taught and indicated by Scripture. There is to be an eschatological development of the kingdom of God, and theology and worship should become richer with the years. Second point: Conservative Protestantism has generally rejected the opportunity to grow and develop Biblically, in spite of loud affirmations of Biblical rigorism. I maintain Biblical rigorism as my position, but Biblical rigorism is not the same as cultic minimalism (which is the true, Stoic, posture of Reformed and Anabaptist worship).

The Cross Shape

Throughout all the centuries of the Christian Church, the cross has been a prominent symbol of the faith. It is probably the most prominent "mere symbol" in the Church, once we have excluded the sacramental signs of Holy Baptism and Holy Communion. The cross has been used in three distinct but interrelated ways: as an architectural design, as a symbol, and as an action. Churches were built in a cruciform shape. A cross was put on the front wall and on the steeple. People crossed themselves to invoke the protection of the covenant God.

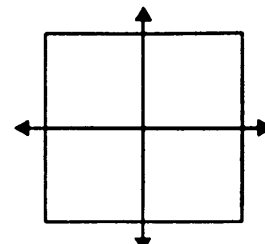
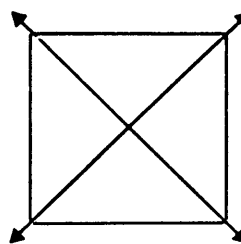
Believe it or not, the Reformers did not object to the act of crossing oneself, provided it was not done superstitiously. They recognized that it might simply be an external bodily action which accompanies an inward prayer for protection. To be under the sign of the cross is to be under the blood of Christ, under the protection of His wings. A man in distress might pray, "Lord Jesus Christ, protect me from harm, for I am Your child, under Your protection," and he might cross himself as an external physical act while he thus prays.

This may make little sense to a modern man, however. Under the influence of Greek philosophy, primarily Stoic asceticism and Neo-platonic mysticism, men despise the body. The only thing that really counts is the inward, mental, psychological motion. An external physical motion, such as crossing oneself while praying for protection, is not only superfluous, but actually evil.

In the Biblical perspective, physical activities are neither evil nor superfluous. When a man repents, he falls to the ground, prostrate before God. When he is horrified at God's judgments, he sits in the dirt and puts dust in his hair, or tears out his hair and rips his garments (cf. e.g., Ezra 9:3). When he is happy at God's blessings, he dances in the streets. And when he wants to invoke God's protection, he . . . well, why don't you fill in the blank?

We may ask, then: When conservative Protestants scream and yell about the act of crossing oneself, are they being true to Scripture, or simply reacting against Rome? True, many Roman Catholics cross themselves superstitiously. The external act is seen magically rather than dynamically, as a way of capturing God's favor rather than as a whole-personed expression of the heart. So what? What does that have to do with how Protestants are to act? I want to make it clear here that I am not *advocating* that conservative Protestants go back to the custom of crossing themselves in prayer. We have not reinstituted this custom in our church here at Geneva. What I am saying is that the custom is not unScriptural, and that the conservative Church at large should give it some thought. If we create a Christian culture, which no longer despises the body and bodily actions, such customs may return. We are probably not to that point yet.

Let's go on to the basic cross shape, as the Bible sets it out. First of all, as always, we go to Genesis 1-4, and in 2:10-14 we find that the fountain in Eden produced a river which split into four heads, and went out to water the four corners of the earth. We may diagram this as follows:



Neither of these diagrams is designed to show what an aerial view of the pre-deluvian world might have looked like. Rather, the diagrams are a symbolic form, showing the basic shape. Later in Scripture, the same picture recurs, with water flowing from a rock, or from the Temple, or the headwaters of the Jordan flowing from the great rock at Caesarea Philippi. The theological continuity among all these pictures lies in their symbolic form. Notice in the two diagrams how the fundamental cross or X form produces a square. The square fills out the space which is fundamentally defined by the cross. The cross has a center, and it has four extensions, which are either the corners of the square, or the centers of the sides of the square. The Bible repeatedly uses this fundamental shape to portray the kingdom of God.

At the center is the initial sanctuary. Adam and Eve would follow the four rivers out, extending dominion along their lines, and branching out to fill and cultivate the whole world. Later, Abraham assigns to Isaac (at God's command) the task of maintaining the central Seed/sanctuary, but sends his other sons downstream to take dominion. All Abraham's sons were covenant people, as we see later on that Moses' father-in-law, Jethro, was a true believer (Ex. 18) and a Midianite (son of Abraham). According to Genesis 25:5, 6, 18, Abraham's other sons were situated "east" of Isaac. Symbolically, this put them at the east gate of Eden, at the east gate of the Tabernacle, where the sacrifices were offered (Gen. 3:24; 4:3, 4). Israel was the priestly nation, keeping the throne/sanctuary of God. The other nations were to gather at the east gate, and bring their tithes and gifts to God. Thus, Ishmael and his half-brothers settled in Havilah (25:18), downstream from Eden (2:11). In Isaiah 60:4-9, these other sons of Abraham are seen returning to Eden, bringing their tithes and gifts (the sons of Keturah, 60:6; the sons of Ishmael, 60:7).

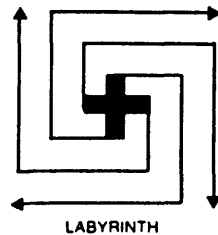
This bipolarity of central fountain Israelites and downstream converted Gentiles recurs in Genesis 21:22-34. The fact that Abimelech and the Philistines (sons of the Egyptians, 10:13, 14) wanted to enter into a covenant with Abraham *proves* that they were converted. There can simply be no doubt about this at all, in the context of Genesis. It is the first fulfillment of the promise to Abram in 12:3, "in you all the families of the earth will be blessed." It happens immediately after the birth and isolation of the Seed, Isaac.¹ What we want to note is that Abraham re-establishes Eden by making the covenant at a well and by planting a tree at the location.

It happens again in Genesis 26:26-33. The whole emphasis in 26:12-25 is on Isaac as the one who provides a fountain of living water. Initially, the Gentiles try to prevent

1. It amazes me how commentators try to make the generous God of Scripture into a niggardly, parsimonious god, who saves virtually nobody. I have even heard preachers try to argue that the Ninevites were not really converted by Jonah! When the Philistines made covenant with Abraham, they were joining the True Church. This would be obvious to every reader, if we were not bringing alien presuppositions to the text. The God of Scripture is a postmillennialist, Who intends to save His world, and condemn only a few holdouts and recalcitrants.

this, but eventually they convert, and make covenant with God. Again, this takes place at a well. The gospel influences are extending to the four corners of the earth.²

One of the most common ways of portraying the cross as the center of the world, with influences spreading everywhere, is the labyrinth design. Here the four rivers of influence are shown "curving" around the world in ever expanding squares, until the whole (square) world is redeemed.

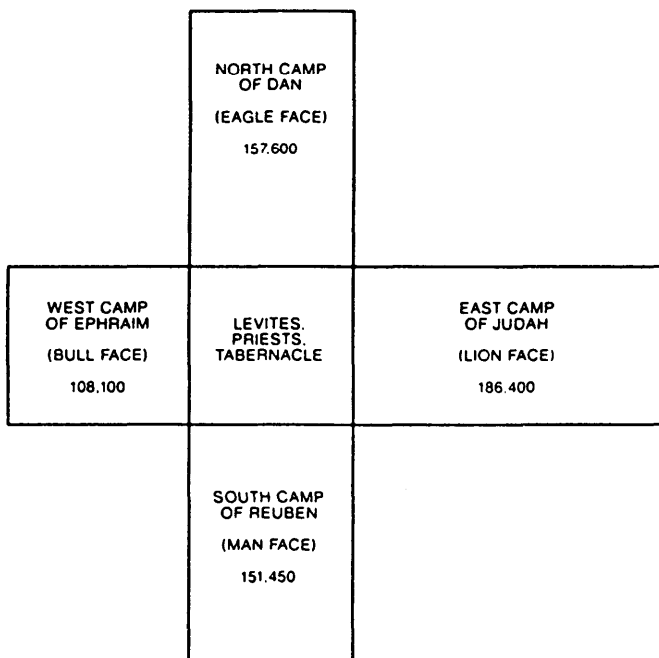


LABYRINTH

The Cross in Architecture

In addition to this cosmic cross/square design, we also find it in the architecture of the Tabernacle. The holy of holies was, of course, a square (actually, a cube). The holy place was a rectangle twice as long as it was wide. The entire court area was also a rectangle twice as long as wide. Within the Tabernacle, the furniture was arranged in a fundamentally cross shape, with the Ark and Incense Altar at the head, the Showbread and Lampstand forming the cross-piece, and the Altar of Burnt Sacrifice at the feet.

Arranged around this sanctuary was a gigantic cross, which might have been visible to Moses from Mount Horeb. According to Numbers 2, the camp on the east side numbered 186,400 men, while the camp on the west numbered 108,100. The camp on the north numbered 157,600, while that on the south numbered 151,450.



2. Let me point out that the third and greatest fulfillment in Genesis of the promise to Abram is in Genesis 41, when Pharaoh converts and places the entire Gentile world under the dominion of a theocratic leader. The fact that Pharaoh hearkened to God's Word shows he had become regenerate. That his servants rejoiced at Joseph's salvation of his family (45:16) shows that they were converted. That Joseph married (entered covenant) with the daughter of an Egyptian priest shows that this priest was converted. All this would be obvious to us, if we did not bring false presuppositions to the text. Just because jaundiced secular scholars do not admit to any period of grace in Egyptian history does not mean that there never was any such period. Note that God tells Jacob to go into Egypt at Beersheba, the same fountain of water the Gentile Philistines had drunk from (46:1-5).

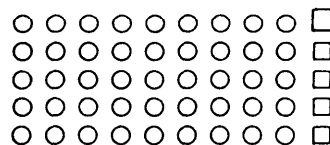
Even if we were to modify this configuration, to fill in the empty spaces and form more of a rectangle, it would still retain a cross shape, with the shortest side west and the longest side east. (Cf. Gen.13:14; 28:14.)

The cross shape is that of a man with his arms extended. It is the shape of the body of Christ, incarnate, and of the Church of Christ, His body mystical. The Church is "one new man" according to Ephesians 2:15. Cruciformity is humanity. Naturally, then, the shape of the Church in the wilderness was that of one large man, a cross shape. To be in Christ is to be in a cross shaped architectural model.

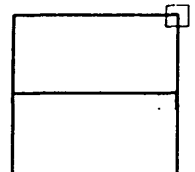
In the diagram I have pointed out that the four faces of the Cherubim, according to Ezekiel 1:10 and Revelation 4:7 may also fit here. Judah is compared to a lion in Gen. 49:9, and Ephraim to a bull in Dt. 33:17. Even if the correspondences prove inexact, the general configuration is the same.

The humaniformity of the kingdom of God is also seen from another fact. The kingdom is to be organized with elders over 10s, 50s, 100s, 1000s, and 10,000s, according to Exodus 18.³ Notice that there are not elders over 500s and 5000s, as we might expect. The reason for this is not apparent, until we realize that this is also the system of organization for the army. When Israel marched out of Egypt, she marched five in a rank. The term translated "battle array" in Exodus 13:18 actually means "five in a rank" (cf. also Josh. 1:14; 4:12; Jud. 7:11; Num. 32:17).⁴

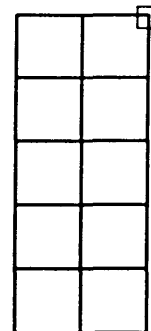
Five squads of ten men, marching in ranks, form a platoon of fifty men. The dimensions of such a platoon are 5 men by 10 men, or a ratio of 1:2. This is one of the common dimensions used in the Tabernacle and its furniture. Two platoons of 50 men form a company of 100 men. Arranged side by side, the dimension is 10 by 10, or 1:1, a square, another common dimension of the house of God. Ten companies gives us a battalion, which we could arrange five in a rank, two companies deep. This gives us the dimension 20 by 50, or 2:5. I am not aware of the occurrence of this shape in the Tabernacle, but if we form a brigade of ten battalions, again arranging them five in a rank, two battalions deep, we get another square 100 by 100.



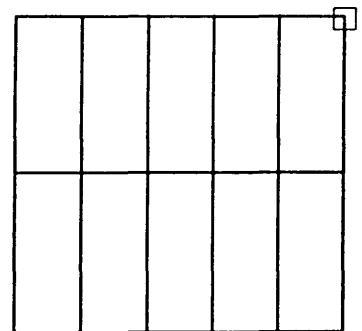
PLATOON
1:2



COMPANY
1:1



BATTALION
5:2



BRIGADE
1:1

Of course, the Bible repeatedly tells us that God's house is built of people, that we are living stones in His temple, etc.

3. It is interesting that presbyterians, who strongly defend rule by elders, virtually never notice the system set forth in Exodus 18. Smacks too much of Rome, I guess. There is no pagan hierarchicalism here, merely a division of labor.

4. In Hebrew, *hmsh*. Lexicons sometimes make this out to be a separate root from the *hmsh* meaning "five," but there is no reason to think this. The lexicographers simply don't understand military organization.

It is interesting, however, to see how this was signified to the people of old. The arrangement of the army in groups of five explains the prominence of the number five in the dimensions of the Tabernacle. Five seems to be the number for preeminence and power.⁵ Here again, to sum up, we see the humaniformity of the house of God, and thus the appropriateness of the use of the cross shape in church architecture.

We can easily coalesce the cosmic cross with the humaniform cross. At the center, in the Tabernacle, was a spring of water, the laver of cleansing. In Ezekiel 47, that fountain pours life to all the world. As Israel was to be a priest to the nations, the water can be seen to flow through the tribes, the limbs of the cross, to the four corners of the earth.

Defilement spreads similarly. Thus, the world is cursed all the way from the center to its four ends. Accordingly, atoning blood had to be placed on the four horns of the altar. Accordingly also, our Lord's visible wounds were positioned at the extremities of his body: hands, feet, and head. Thus, the ends of the earth, signified by the ends of the cross, are covered by His blood.

Why should we fear this type of symbolism, since the Bible abounds in it? If Protestants truly believe in Biblical worship and theology, they need to take such things seriously. It should be clear that the cross is not simply a symbol of the death of Christ. It is a symbol of dominion, that His death and victory extend to the ends of the world. It is a symbol of His body, the new man, the Church, and of His rule over it. Thus, it is entirely appropriate to use the cross as a symbol of the Church.

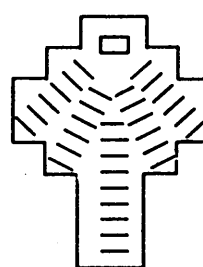
The second commandment forbids bowing down and serving anything made by human hands. It does not forbid the making of artistic or symbolic objects, nor does it forbid their placement in the environment of worship. There is no Biblical principle against placing a cross at the front of the place of worship, especially since the cross is a God-ordained, not a man made, sign.

5. I have studied this at length in an appendix on four and five fold restitution, in my forthcoming book, *The Law of the Covenant: An Exposition of Exodus 21-23*.

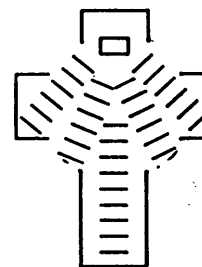
How practical is the cross shape for architecture? If we start with the concept of people gathered around the Word and Sacrament, we come up initially with a "church in the round" design. Since we don't want people staring at each other in worship, generally the church in the round is not a complete circle. The cross shape easily lends itself to this, particularly if we modify it by expanding the center into a square or circle. We thus retain the gathering of people around the Word and Sacraments, which is both practical and theologically satisfying.



CHURCH IN THE
ROUND



MODIFIED
CRUCIFORM



MODIFIED
CRUCIFORM

(to be concluded)

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