

The Cross and the Crucifix **by Steve Ray**

Dear Protestant Friend:

You display a bare cross in your homes; we display the cross *and* the crucifix. What is the difference and why? The *cross* is an upright post with a crossbeam in the shape of a “T”. A *crucifix* is the same, but it has Christ’s body (corpus) attached to the cross. As an Evangelical Protestant I rejected the crucifix—Christ was no longer on the cross but had ascended to heaven. So why do I now tremble in love at the site of a crucifix? Let’s examine the history and issues surrounding the two.

I will start with the Old Testament and the Jews’ use of images and prohibition of idols. I know in advance that it is not a thorough study, but it will give a general overview of the issues. I will try to provide a brief overview of the *Cross* and the *Crucifix*, the origin, the history, and the differing perspectives of Catholic and Protestant. It will try to catch the historical flow and include the pertinent points. The outline is as follows:

1. The Three Main Protestant Objections to the Crucifix
2. Images and Gods in the Old Testament
3. Images and Images of Christ in the New Testament
4. The Cross in the First Centuries
5. The Crucifix Enters the Picture
6. The “Reformation” and Iconoclasm
7. Modern Anti-Catholics and the Crucifix
8. Ecumenical Considerations

The Three Main Protestant Objections to the Crucifix

Let me begin by defining “Protestant” as used in this article. First, it is used to describe the first Reformers who tore down crucifixes and crosses in the first years of the Reformation; and second, it refers to general American Evangelical-type Protestants. Granted there are many Anglican and “high” Luthers and others that do not object to the crucifix or other Christian symbolism. With that behind us, let’s begin.

The *first* major objection of the Protestant regarding the crucifix (an image of Christ on the cross) is that Christ is no longer on the cross--He is risen. I was raised with this observation and my friend would ridicule the Catholic traditions. My friend also challenged us when we first became Catholics, commenting, “We serve a risen Christ, not one that is still on the cross.” Unfortunately for them, since childhood my mother had valued her beautiful Christmas crèche scene. I asked the obvious: “Do you serve the risen Christ or one still in the manger?” (I also had to comment on the cute little statue of Our Lady standing over the plastic baby Jesus, along with the animals.)

Second, Protestants see the image of Christ on the cross as a violation of the command to make no graven image. The Reformers were big on this. Protestants now utilize plain crosses in their “churches,” on their walls, and around their necks, just as they have

pictures of Jesus (always with soft skin and melodrama) on their walls. (I was raised with this feminine Jesus presiding, ever so romantically, over our dinner table. After spending time in the Holy Land, driving through the Judean wilderness, and ascending Mount Tabor, which he and his disciples frequented, I doubt he was so dainty and delicate; he probably had calves like a bear and smelled a bit like one as well.) However, at the turn of the this century the Protestant churches (excluding Lutheran) were still pretty much opposed to display of the cross, even the bare cross. The bare cross was not in wide use until recently, though current Protestants don't know their own history on the matter and that their predecessors opposed *it* as much as they did the Crucifix.

Third, they object to the Crucifix because it is Catholic and to condone or display the Crucifix is to make a statement in favor of Catholicism. No one of "Reformed" persuasion would want to be identified as a Catholic. A bare cross seems to be generic, which is what most Protestants like--generic Christianity--with no history to criticize or Church to obey.

Images and Gods in the Old Testament

Since the people in olden ages worshiped idols made of earthly materials [Endnote 1], God forbade the children of Israel to possess such "gods". "Then God spoke all these words, saying, "I am the Lord your God, who brought you out of the land of Egypt, out of the house of slavery. You shall have no other gods before Me. You shall not make for yourself an idol, or any likeness of what is in heaven above or on the earth beneath or in the water under the earth. You shall not worship them or serve them; for I, the Lord your God, am a jealous God'" (Ex 20:1-3).

Even while God was inscribing these Words on the tablets of stone, the Israelites were violating His command. "Then all the people tore off the gold rings which were in their ears, and brought them to Aaron. And he took this from their hand, and fashioned it with a graving tool, and made it into a molten calf; and they said, 'This is your god, O Israel, who brought you up from the land of Egypt'" (Ex. 32:34).

We know that it was not the image itself, which was the problem. It was the making of an image that was considered to be a god and the subsequent worship of the image as a god. This is clear from the Scriptures, for if the making of an image was evil, then God commanded His people to violate His own laws. We will look at three examples in which God commanded the children of Israel to make images that were the likeness of "what is in heaven above or on the earth beneath or in the water under the earth."

First, the Mercy Seat which was situated in the Holy of Holies was to have golden cherubim above it with wings outspread. We read, "And you shall make two cherubim of gold, make them of hammered work at the two ends of the mercy seat" (Ex 25:18). Cherubim are images of things in heaven, angelic beings who stand before the throne of God. These images were to be placed at the center of Israel's worship. However, there was no thought of worshiping the golden images, they were there for illustrative reasons, to replicate a spiritual reality, and they were three-dimensional, formed out of gold, at the command of God Himself. The very goldsmiths who were condemned for making a

golden image (the calf) are now commanded to make a golden image (the cherubim).

Second, Moses was given detailed directions for the vestments worn by Aaron and the priests. Embroidered into the hem of Aaron's gorgeous robe were artistic representations of bells and pomegranates. "And you shall make on its hem pomegranates of blue and purple and scarlet material, all around on its hem, and bells of gold between them all around: a golden bell and a pomegranate, a golden bell and a pomegranate, all around on the hem of the robe. And it shall be on Aaron when he ministers; and its tinkling may be heard when he enters and leaves the holy place before the Lord, that he may not die" (Ex 28:33-B35). An image or likeness of a fruit, something obviously copied from an earthly model.

The third example is found during the Israelites' forty years of wandering in the wilderness. The people became impatient and spoke against God and Moses. In response God sent poisonous serpents into their camp and many died. When they begged Moses to intercede for them the Lord responded with the command to make an image of a serpent. "Then the Lord said to Moses, 'Make a fiery serpent, and set it on a standard; and it shall come about, that everyone who is bitten, when he looks at it, he shall live'. And Moses made a bronze serpent and set it on the standard; and it came about, that if a serpent bit any man, when he looked to the bronze serpent, he lived" (Num 21:8-9). A "graven image" of a serpent was raised upon a pole to be gazed upon by the children of Israel, and the image was used by God to heal the people from the fiery bites of the serpents.

The bronze serpent, even raised on a pole, was not a violation of God's earlier command against graven images. The earlier command was against having or worshiping a god besides the Lord. *Image* was synonymous with the practice of ancient peoples who made and called images "god" and actually worshiped them. This was sin, not the simple act of making or having a representation of a physical or heavenly object. It is the *intent*, and the *purpose* for which the image is made that becomes the sin, not the image itself. An image is simply an image, a representation. On the other hand an image intended to be a god is a god and is thus idolatry. Making a dish or cup is not a sin, worshiping the dish or cup as a god is idolatry and therefore sin.

That the *intent* and *reaction* to an image is the real issue is born out by the fact that the bronze serpent was good, commanded by God, and served a sacramental purpose, yet when it was later treated as an idol, by the act of worship, it became idolatry and fit the category of an image that was a "god" that was a substitute for *the* God of Israel, the living God. "Ahaz king of Judah . . . removed the high places and broke down the sacred pillars and cut down the Asherah. He also broke in pieces the bronze serpent that Moses had made, for until those days the sons of Israel burned incense to it [as to a god]; and it was called Nehushtan [the piece of bronze]" (2 Ki 18:1, 4).

Images, representations of real things, and pictures or statues were not forbidden. There was always a tendency in ancient cultures to convert such images into gods to be worshiped. It was this idolatry that was evil, proscribed by God. Any object, whether it is representative of earthly or heavenly things or not, can become an idol [a god] and it is

this idolatry that is wicked, not the making of objects.

Images and Images of Christ in the New Testament

Something changed when Jesus entered the world. The incarnation split space and time as the divine Being became a man. God had always been invisible, but now he was made visible for the first time. What was not visible and therefore unreproducible was now visible and made able to be reproduced. Thomas said, "Show us the Father" and Jesus responded, "Have I been with you so long and you still don't know me" (Jn 14:9). Paul tells us that Jesus is the image of the invisible God (Col 1:15; 2:9). Therefore, that which earlier had had no image now had a visible appearance. Jesus could now be reproduced in art because He Himself had taken on flesh and was a visible image of the Father.

The early Church was leery of images due to the propensity of the ancient cultures to turn images into deities. The Jews were leery because of their idolatrous past, constantly remonstrated by God for turning "earthly" things into gods of worship, mimicking the pagan nations. Gentiles (Roman, Greek and barbarian) had gods of stone everywhere, gods of their own making. Christians were careful about images to make sure no one would begin worshiping, or suspect them of worshiping, a god of stone or precious metals made with human hands. Because the early Christians worshiped the "invisible God," with no idols [gods] to prostrate themselves in front of, as the pagans did, they were accused of being "atheists". They were not atheists in the modern sense of the word because they believed in a divine being--God, but to the ancient cultures they were atheist (*a-no, theos*-God) because they had no "visible god" [visible idol] that they worshiped and made sacrifice to [Endnote 2].

There is no existing record of the cross being used as an image or sign in the New Testament or in the first century, though to be fair there is very little Christian art or written material in existence from the first century outside the New Testament. Paul states with great passion that he "gloried in the cross" and preached nothing but Christ and Him crucified [Endnote 3]. In the early years Christian art was limited by the very fact that they were a despised "Jewish" sect which did not have the means to create great art that would last. The only real Christian art available before Constantine is really limited to that which was painted in the Roman catacombs [Endnote 4]. In the very early centuries before Constantine, we see Christ depicted as a fish (*Ichthus*), as a shepherd, Jonah, etc. What is probably the first extant image of Jesus, is depicted in the earliest Roman catacombs of St. Priscilla. "A small chapel that contains the earliest-known depiction of the Madonna and Child, *The Virgin and Child with Isaiah* (second half of the 2nd century). Alongside it is another fresco, *The Good Shepherd with Two Sheep* [Endnote 5].

Eusebius mentions a likeness of Christ, Peter, Paul and others. Before 325 AD he wrote:

"Since I have mentioned this city [Caesarea Philippi] I do not think it proper to omit an account which is worthy of record for posterity. For they say that the woman with an issue of blood, who, as we learn from the sacred Gospel (Mt 10:20 ff.), received from our

Savior deliverance from her affliction, came from this place, and that her house is shown in the city, and that remarkable memorials of the kindness of the Savior to her remain there. For there stands upon an elevated stone, by the gates of her house, a brazen image of a woman kneeling, with her hands stretched out, as if she were praying. Opposite this is another upright image of a man, made of the same material, clothed decently in a double cloak, and extending his hand toward the woman. At his feet, beside the statue itself, is a certain strange plant, which climbs up to the hem of the brazen cloak, and is a remedy for all kinds of diseases. They say that this statue is an image of Jesus. It has remained to our day, so that we ourselves also saw it when we were staying in the city. Nor is it strange that those of the Gentiles who, of old, were benefited by our Savior, should have done such things, since we have learned also that the likenesses of his apostles Paul and Peter, and of Christ himself, are preserved in paintings, the ancients being accustomed, as it is likely, according to a habit of the Gentiles, to pay this kind of honor indiscriminately to those regarded by them as deliverers” [Endnote 6].

There is ample evidence that Christ, the apostles and other Christian images were depicted through art in the first centuries. We have no record of the cross used as an artistic image before the fourth century. “Beginning with the fourth century, the Crucifixion was one of the central images in the history in the history of Christian art. In earliest Christianity, the daily threat of crucifixion combined with a fear of idolatry deterred images of the Crucifixion. Following the Emperor Constantine’s decrees of toleration and political recognition of Christianity, images of the Crucifixion began to enter into Christian art as the Cross, Crucifix, and Crucifixion became the central identifying emblems of the Christian, replacing the fish” [Endnote 7]. One, if not the earliest representations of Christ being crucified is a fifth century panel on the brass door of Santa Sabina in Rome (See *Rome*, [New York: Dorling Kindersley, 1997], 25). The early Christians were somewhat reticent to show the means of the Lord’s execution since it was a grisly and cruel Roman institution. One would not expect us to portray the electric chair as a sign of victory shortly after such an execution, had Christ died in our generation.

The Cross in the First Centuries

However, even if we have no records of the cross used in art or depicted in stone or catacombs in the first two centuries, Tertullian comments in several places that the Christians of the second century routinely and universally “crossed themselves” with the “sign of the cross” on their foreheads. He says it in such a way as to imply it is a custom practiced throughout the Christian world and one that had its origins in the tradition of the New Testament Church [Endnote 8]. Many Protestants today, recoil at the Sign of the Cross viewing it as a pagan practice and a sign of superstition. Little does the average Protestant realize that this sacred gesture of “crossing” or “signing” was universally practiced in the New Testament Church at least two centuries before the writings of the New Testament were collected and the canon closed.

Regarding the early artistic depiction of the Cross, we read in the *Catholic Encyclopedia*:

“It is probable, though we have no historical evidence for it, that the primitive Christians

used the cross to distinguish one another from the pagans in ordinary social intercourse. The latter called the Christians ‘cross-worshippers’ [Endnote 9], and ironically added, ‘they worship that which they deserve’. The Christian apologists, such as Tertullian (*Apol.*, xvi Ad. *Nationes*, xii) and Minucius Felix (*Octavius*, ix, xii, xxviii), felicitously replied to the pagan taunt by showing that their persecutors themselves adored cruciform objects. Such observations throw light on a peculiar fact of primitive Christian life, i.e. the almost total absence from Christian monuments of the period of persecutions of the plain, unadorned cross (E. Reusens, “Elements d’archeologie chretienne”, 1st ed., 110). The truculent sarcasm of the heathens prevented the faithful from openly displaying this sign of salvation. When the early Christians did represent the sign of the cross on their monuments, nearly all sepulchral in character, they felt obliged to disguise it in some artistic and symbolical way” [Endnote 10].

The Christians would not have been referred to as “cross worshipers” if they did not display and venerate the cross, albeit furtively, in public. They crossed themselves in public as is evident from the plethora of quotations available from the first five centuries. There was, however, a fear of being too obvious with visible symbols due to the possibility of persecution and death. The *Encyclopedia Britannica* confirms this: “Cross forms were used as symbols, religious or otherwise, long before the Christian Era. . . . Before the time of Constantine in the 4th century, Christians were extremely reticent about portraying the cross because too open a display of it might expose them to ridicule or danger. After Constantine converted to Christianity, he abolished crucifixion as a death penalty and promoted, as symbols of the Christian faith, both the cross and the *chi-rho* monogram of the name of Christ. The symbols became immensely popular in Christian art and funerary monuments from c. 350 AD” [Endnote 11].

The cross was used in the early centuries but it was usually in disguise. “The truculent sarcasms of the heathens prevented the faithful from openly displaying this sign of salvation. When the early Christians did represent the sign of the cross on their monuments, nearly all sepulchral in character, they felt obliged to disguise it in some artistic and symbolic way. One of the oldest of these symbols of the cross is the anchor. . . . generally on the stone slabs of the oldest sections of the Roman catacombs, especially in the cemeteries of Callistus, Domitilla, Priscilla, and the others. The anchor, originally a symbol of hope in general, takes on in this way a much higher meaning: that of hope based on the Cross of Christ” [Endnote 12].

That the cross would become the symbol of the Christian was to be expected. The Romans used the cross as a sign of their victories, glorying in the death of their enemies. The Cross of Christ was not only the instrument of death whereby death was defeated and sin conquered but it was also the emblem of Roman cruelty which eventually became the sign of the conversion of the Roman Empire. No wonder the Christians openly adopted the cross as their symbol. It had always been a sign of victory, and now the Christians claimed it as the sign of their victory over sin and death and every enemy. We find Ignatius of Antioch stating at the end of the first century, “My spirit bows in adoration to the cross, which is a stumbling-block to those who do not believe, but is to you for salvation and eternal life” (*Letter to the Ephesians*, 18).

The Crucifix Enters the Picture

The Christians of the first centuries did not actually add the figure of Christ to the cross. “The crucifix is a Latin cross with the body of Christ attached to it. In early Christian art the Crucifixion was represented by the Latin cross alone, but by the fifth century the body of Christ was painted on the cross, and later became sculpture attached by four nails, one in each hand and foot” [Endnote 13]. The Church added the figure of Christ to remind the faithful of the great suffering that brought about their redemption. During most ages of the Church, Christians were illiterate. In fact, in the Roman Empire only 10% of the population could read and write (Wayne Meeks, *The Moral World of the First Christians* [Philadelphia: Westminster Press, 1986], 62). The great and beautiful symbols in the Church, including the Crucifix, were “the Gospel for the illiterate.” Bibles were not available because the printing press had not been invented. The great images and stained glass windows gave the poor and illiterate the opportunity to gaze upon the Christ and the Gospel and tell the stories in picture to their children and the unbeliever. These images also inspired adoration and faith in the believers as they worshiped their Savior in His Church.

The Protestant Rebellion and Iconoclasm

Things went along unchanged until the Protestant “Reformation”. When the Reformers threw off the “yoke of Rome” they jettisoned anything that reminded them of the Catholic Church as well. The crucifix *and the cross* were discarded and destroyed as idolatrous images. Martin Luther was more tolerant of the symbol of the cross than the more radical reformers. This was true in the sixteenth century as well as today [Endnote 14]. Another reformer named Carlstadt took his stand against such things, based upon his independent interpretation of Scripture: “Thou shalt not make unto thee any graven image, or any likeness of any thing that is in heaven above, or that is in the earth beneath, or that is in the water under the earth.” Roland Bainton says he [Carlstadt] concluded that “Scripture was reinforced by his own experience. He had been so deeply attached to images as to be diverted by them from true worship. ‘God is a spirit’ and must be worshiped only in spirit. Christ is a spirit, but the image of Christ is wood, silver, or gold. One who contemplates a crucifix is reminded only of the physical suffering of Christ rather than of his spiritual tribulations” [Endnote 15].

Iconoclasm was the term for the tearing down of icons or images. “Some Zwinglians cite the commandment against the making of graven images and a few incidents of iconoclasm occurred. In September Hans Hottinger, a shoemaker, overthrew a wayside crucifix at Stadelhofe, outside Zurich” [Endnote 16].

Calvin and the Reformed tradition were even more radical. “Due to his passionate antipapism and the influence of Zwingli . . . Calvin was more radical than Luther in . . . renovating the churches by removing images, crosses, side altars, candles, and organs, anything that could serve as an intermediary affect between the worshiper and God” [Endnote 17]. Calvinist theologian Beza (1519-1605) wrote against the Lutheran tolerance of images, including crosses and crucifixes, “Our hope reposes in the true cross

of our Lord Jesus Christ, not in that image. Therefore I must admit that I thoroughly detest the image of the crucifix . . . [and] cannot endure it” [Endnote 18].

In summary of the Reformers view of images, especially crosses and crucifixes, it is clear they detested both equally. They rejected them because they were supposedly violations of God’s law about idols and because they were Catholic. “When Protestantism arose, their fury of its leaders was oftentimes directed against the crosses which they regarded as a symbol of Popery, and they accordingly tore them down from the Catholic churches which they seized and devoted to their own worship--placing over them, instead, a weather-vane, fitting emblem of that inconstancy and uncertainty which are ‘blown about with every wind of doctrine.’ In recent years a better spirit is manifesting itself towards the sacred symbol of our salvation, and crosses are appearing on and in some Protestant churches. But among Catholics the cross has always been held in honor” [Endnote 19]. Interestingly enough, by my own observation, even today the Reformed churches in Switzerland still have the Rooster on every steeple.

Not too long ago the Protestant Christians of our acquaintance would have deplored the bare cross equally with the crucifix. They would have condemned *it* as idolatrous and sinful just as harshly as the crucifix. Now they accept the cross in their “churches” and around their neck. The issue of *cross* vs. *crucifix* now is simply to distinguish between Catholic and Protestant. I think most Protestants have historical amnesia and don’t know why they do or don’t revere one or the other. They are simply products of their traditions and “ecclesial communities”.

Modern Anti-Catholics and the Crucifix

Anti-Catholics are still hacking away at this issue with vigor (see Boettner’s *Roman Catholicism*). They are usually Fundamentalist Protestants and claim that the “crucifix” is an invention of the “Romish Church.” They may not even realize that in the earliest years of the Church not even the image of the bare cross (to the best of our knowledge) was used for liturgical or devotional purposes. When Protestants utilize bare crosses they are actually practicing Catholic tradition, a historical development, one that cannot be found in *sola Scriptura* [Endnote 20]. They also confuse *Dogma* (Tradition) and *Practice* (tradition). “It is immaterial that many practices are present neither in the Bible nor in early Christian history. Practices are not the subject of revelation, the way doctrines are; they are adopted as present needs require and are dropped for the same reason. To continue with this kind of ‘history’: Fundamentalist writers begin by listing ‘inventions’, mixing doctrines and practices indiscriminately. They then assign dates of origin to them. They generally claim the ‘inventions’ postdate the Edict of Milan, which was issued in 313 AD and made Christianity legal in the Roman Empire. This is the cutoff date, all the bad things in Catholicism supposedly arising after that point” [Endnote 21].

From a Fundamentalist or Evangelical Protestant’s perspective, the gradual encroachment of “unbiblical” elements of worship is called the “pagan convert” theory which states that Catholic Church was infiltrated by pagans after the Church became legal and the pagan Roman priests rushed to get new jobs as priests in the new official religion. These pagan priests brought all their pagan rituals and paraphernalia into the Church which irreparably

tarnished and destroyed her.

An example of the way this is approached by the Fundamentalist is as follows: “Item: ‘Worship of the cross, images, and relics authorized in . . . 786 AD.’ Do Catholics give slivers of wood, carvings of marble, and pieces of bone the kind of adoration they give God? That is what Boettner [anti-Catholic who will be quoted next] seems to say. What if a Catholic were to say to him, ‘I saw you kneeling with your Bible in your hands. Why do you worship a book?’ He would rightly answer that he does not worship a book. He uses the Bible as an aid to prayer. Likewise, Catholics do not worship the Cross or images or relics. . . . The man who keeps a picture of his family in his wallet does not worship his wife and children, but he honors them. . . . No one really thinks the pictures are themselves the objects of worship” [Endnote 22].

One famous anti-Catholic author goes so far as to condemn all crosses. My guess is that he investigated the matter, found Christians did not “sport” crosses until the time of Emperor Constantine and then he attempted to act consistently by condemning *all* crosses. Most Protestants don’t think too deeply about this and don’t even realize the inconsistency of their practice, that it is not supported within their *sola Scriptura* doctrine. This author I mention is Loraine Boettner and his book has been called the “bible of anti-Catholicism.” It is a sham which has been repeatedly repudiated. He states,

“*Crosses and crucifixes.* The most widely used religious symbol both for Roman Catholics and Protestants is the cross, much more so in Roman Catholic than in Protestant churches. The crucifix is a cross with the figure of Christ crucified upon it. In the Roman Church the sign of the cross has to be on every altar, on the roofs of all Roman Catholic churches, in the school and hospital rooms, and in the homes of its people. For interior use the crucifix is often displayed rather than the cross. Small crosses four or five inches long and suspended on a chain are often worn as part of the religious garb of priests and nuns, and a small gold cross on a chain suspended around the neck is often worn by the women.

“But as regards the cross as a symbol of Christianity, we must point out that the Scriptures do not give one single instance in which a mechanical cross was so used, or in which it was venerated in any way. There are, of course, numerous instances in Scripture in which the cross is spoken of figuratively. Nor is there any evidence that the cross was used as a Christian symbol during the first three centuries of the Christian era. A Roman Catholic authority asserts: ‘It may be safely assumed that only after the edict of Milan, A.D., 312, was the cross used as a permanent sign of our redemption. De Rossi (a Roman Catholic archaeologist) states positively that no monogram of Christ, discovered in the Catacombs or other places, can be traced to a period anterior to the year 312” (*The American Ecclesiastical Review*, p.275; Sept., 1920).

“The cross as a symbol of Christianity, then, it is generally agreed, goes back only to the days of Emperor Constantine, who is supposed to have turned from paganism to Christianity. In the year 312 he was engaged in a military campaign in Western Europe. According to tradition he called upon the pagan gods, but there was no response. Shortly

afterward he saw in the sky a pillar of light in the form of a cross, on which were written the words, “*In hoc signo vinces,*” “*In this sign conquer*”. Shortly afterward he crossed into Italy and won a decisive victory near Rome. Taking this as a token of divine favor, he issued various edicts in favor of the Christians. Whether he ever became a Christian or not is disputed, some holding that he remained a pagan all his life and promoted paganism and Christianity alternately as best served his purposes, although he professed Christianity and was baptized shortly before his death in 337. At any rate, the alleged sign in the sky, like so many other signs of that and later times, undoubtedly will have to be explained on other grounds. The idea that Christ would command a pagan emperor to make a military banner embodying the cross and to go forth conquering in that sign, is wholly inconsistent with the general teaching of the Bible and with the spirit of Christianity.

“In any event the cross, in pre-Christian as well as in Christian times, has always been looked upon as an instrument of torture and shame. Christians do not act wisely when they make such an instrument an object of reverence and devotion. Paul spoke of what he termed ‘the offense of the cross’ (Gal. 5: 1 1; KJV) [Endnote 23]. And in Hebrews 12:2 we read that Jesus ‘endured the cross, despising the shame.’ In view of these things we should not regard the device on which Christ was crucified as holy or as an object of devotion. Rather we should recognize it for what it is, a detestable thing, a pagan symbol of sin and shame.

“When Jesus said: ‘If any man would come after me, let him deny himself, and take up his cross, and follow me’ (Matt. 16:24). He did not mean that one should have a gold representation of it hanging from a chain about his neck or dangling from long cords at his side. He meant rather that one who is a faithful follower should be willing to do His will, to serve and to endure suffering as He did, since all those who sincerely follow Him will meet with some degree of hardship and suffering and perhaps even with persecution. Ever since the time that the Emperor Constantine allegedly saw the sign of the cross in the sky, and took that as his banner, that banner has been raised over a half Christian and half pagan church. Protestant churches, too, have often offended in this matter, and, like Lot, who pitched his tent too close to Sodom, these bodies have camped too close to the gates of Rome. The true Christian conquers, not through the sign of a fiery cross or the charm of a jeweled crucifix, but through the Gospel of Christ, which is the ‘power of God unto salvation to every one that believeth’ (Rom. 1:16)” [Endnote 24]. (Italics and footnote mine).

Ecumenical Considerations

Most Protestants, I am convinced, don’t “cross themselves” and reject the crucifix in favor of a bare cross, simply because these practices are Catholic--period. They do not think deeply on this matter, they simply try to avoid “Romish ritual”. They say cute things like “Jesus is risen and not on the cross, so why do you Catholics leave Him on the cross?”, but that is not really the reason they shun the crucifix. They shun the crucifix in principle because it is Catholic and in their heart they believe Catholic teaching and practice is unbiblical, and therefore to be avoided or rebuked, certainly not encouraged or practiced. I know, I was there as an Evangelical Protestant Christian.

This may not be the conscious action of modern Protestants, but it is certainly their heritage as the progeny of the “Reformation”. It boils down to principle, intolerance, and even pettiness. Catholics should not take down their crosses or their crucifixes to please Protestant friends. Instead, they should educate their Protestant friends to the history of the subject and expose the silly inconsistencies of the Protestant position. Protestants tend to be uninterested in church history and while they criticize Catholics for following tradition and the Pope, they slavishly follow their own Fundamentalist traditions and believe everything their pastors tell them. The difference is that the Catholic has 2,000 years of history, exegesis, and precedent, whereas the Protestant makes it up as he goes along, reinventing the wheel in thousands of differing styles and shapes with each generation.

If we as Catholics are so ready to give up our Catholic distinctives, customs passed down to us by the Fathers, then Protestant brethren will conclude that the Catholic distinctives are irrelevant, even to the Catholic. They will then conclude that the sacraments, Holy Tradition, the Magisterium, and other “Catholic things” are just unnecessary appurtenances. For example: a Catholic goes to pray with a group of Protestants. The Protestants are watching very carefully. The Protestants don’t sacrifice a single thing-- they pray like Protestants, like they do in their exclusively Protestant circles. The Catholic, on the other hand, does not cross himself with Protestants, does not begin “In the Name of the Father, and of the Son, and of the Holy Spirit,” and does not mention Mary, the Saints, and never quotes from the seven books the Protestants removed from the Bible

What does the non-Catholic think? “We gave up nothing to pray with the Catholic, we stuck to our principles. The Catholic gave up his Catholic distinctives, in other words, the Catholic left his Catholicism at the door with his hat and coat. He is willing to give up his Catholicism to “become Protestant” for an hour, like us, so why is it necessary for us to consider Catholicism as anything singularly important? If he is willing to give up as unnecessary his Catholic customs, then probably the other distinctively “Catholic things” are also dispensable: the Real Presence, regenerative baptism, infant baptism, Sacred Tradition and the Magisterium, Mary and the saints, sexual mores, Purgatory, the Sacrifice of the Mass, etc.”

If we Catholics so willingly to set aside *practice* (Catholic distinctives), the Protestants assume we will just as easily dispense with the *dogma*. They will assume this because they don’t understand the difference between the two. This conclusion is the inevitable, though not necessarily factual conclusion, and it does great harm to the Church and to Christian unity. In the practice of “compromising unity,” a false unity, we have the potential to damage true unity under the successor of Peter. These Catholics should put the crucifix back on your wall, cross yourself proudly, and wear their Catholicism proudly, unabashedly, without apologizing to anyone.

I don’t believe it is an exaggeration to say that the bare cross is a sign of Protestantism in many cases, like the crucifix is to the Catholic. “Ecumenically-sensitive” Catholics have

in the past removed their crucifixes (and other distinctly Catholic symbols) to accommodate their Protestant brethren [Endnote 25]; does the Protestant take down their Protestant symbols and statement, the bare cross or others, out of sensitivity to their Catholic brethren, or do they leave *their* stripped down statements boldly in place?

This has been a brief overview of the situation with images, the *cross* and the *Crucifix*. It has gone through many stages and various controversies have swirled around the great sign of the Christian and the Catholic Church. The best we can do is learn our history, correctly understand Scripture, trust in the Church of God, “the pillar and foundation of the truth,” and be bold and confident about Her faith and practice.

As an endnote I would add an interesting comment in Kenneth Latourette’s history of the Church (*The First Five Centuries* 1:190), that “We hear, too, of a pagan converted in one region in Gaul early in the fifth century because, when a plague attacked the herds, some of the cattle of the Christians escaped or recovered and this good fortune was attributed to the use of the sign of the cross.”

Endnotes:

1. Gen 31:19, 30: Just before Jacob fled from his father-in-law Laban, Rachel stole Laban’s gods. “When Laban had gone to shear his flock, then Rachel stole the household idols that were her father’s.” When Laban caught up with Jacob he asked, -AWhy did you steal my gods?”

2. In the second century the Christian apologist Athenagoras wrote, “Three things are alleged against us: atheism, Thyestean feasts, Oedipodean intercourse. . . . As regards, first of all, the allegation that we are atheists--for I will meet the charges one by one, that we may not be ridiculed for having no answer to give to those who make them. . . . But to us, who distinguish God from matter, and teach that matter is one thing and God another, and that they are separated by a wide interval (for that the Deity is uncreated and eternal, to be beheld by the understanding and reason alone, while matter is created and perishable), is it not absurd to apply the name of atheism [to our belief]?” (Athenagoras, *A Plea for the Christians* chap. 3, 4 in *The Ante-Nicene Fathers*, ed. by A. Roberts and J. Donaldson [Grand Rapids, MI: Eerdmans, 1983], 2:130-B131.

3. Gal 6:14: “But far be it from me to glory except in the cross of our Lord Jesus Christ, by which the world has been crucified to me, and I to the world.”

1 Cor 2:2: “For I decided to know nothing among you except Jesus Christ and him crucified.”

4. “When the first Christian works of art were produced remains a matter of conjecture. Of the surviving monuments, none can be dated earlier than about 200 AD; therefore; we lack all direct knowledge of art in the service of Christianity before that time. In fact there is little we know for certain about Christian art until we reach the reign of

Constantine the Great, because the third century, too, is poorly represented. The painted decorations of the Roman catacombs, the underground burial places of the Christians are the only sizable and coherent body of material, but these constitute only merely one among various possible kinds of Christian art” (H. W. Janson, *History of Art* [Englewood Cliffs, NJ: Prentice-Hall, 1974], 158).

5. Tim Jepson, *Fodor’s Exploring Rome* (New York, NY: Fodor’s Travel Publ., 1985), 60-61. See also the *Catechism of the Catholic Church* (Citta del Vaticano: Libreria Editrice Vaticana, 1994), 13.

6. Eusebius, *The History of the Church* 7, 18 in *The Nicene and Post Nicene Fathers* ed. trans. by Philip Schaff and Henry Wace (Grand Rapids, MI: Eerdmans, 1982), 304.

7. Diane Apostolos-Cappadona, *Dictionary of Christian Art* (New York, NY: The Continuum Publ. Co., 1995), 93.

8. “We feel pained should any wine or bread, even though our own, be cast upon the ground. 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. For these and such like rules, if thou requires a law in the Scriptures, thou shalt find none: tradition will be pleaded to thee as originating, custom as confirming, and faith as observing them” (*The Chaplet* 3).

9. “Then, if any of you think we render superstitious adoration to the cross, in that adoration he is sharer with us. If you offer homage to a piece of wood at all, it matters little what it is like when the substance is the same: it is of no consequence the form, if you have the very body of the god. And yet how far does the Athenian Pallas differ from the stock of the cross, or the Pharian Ceres as she is put up uncarved to sale, a mere rough stake and piece of shapeless wood? Every stake fixed in an upright position is a portion of the cross; we render our adoration, if you will have it so, to a god entire and complete. We have shown before that your deities are derived from shapes modeled from the cross. But you also worship victories, for in your trophies the cross is the heart of the trophy. The camp religion of the Romans is all through a worship of the standards, a setting the standards above all gods. Well, as those images decking out the standards are ornaments of crosses. All those hangings of your standards and banners are robes of crosses. I praise your zeal: you would not consecrate crosses unclothed and unadorned” (Tertullian’s *Apology* 16 in *The Ante-Nicene Fathers* ed. by Alexander Roberts and James Donaldson [Grand Rapids, MI: Eerdmans, 1980], 3:31).

10. *The Catholic Encyclopedia*, ed. by Charles G. Herbermann, et al. (New York, NY: Robert Appleton Co., 1908), 4:521.

11. *Encyclopedia Britannica* (Chicago, IL: Encyclopedia Britannica, Inc., 1981), 3:256.

12. *The Catholic Encyclopedia*, ed. by Charles G. Herbermann, et al. (New York, NY:

Robert Appleton Co., 1908), 4:521.

13. Gertrude Grace Sill, *A Handbook of Symbols in Christian Art* (New York, NY: MacMillan, 1975), 33.

14. “Among Protestants, the sole body which habitually uses the crucifix is the Lutheran Church” (*The Oxford Dictionary of the Christian Church* ed. by F. L. Cross and E. A. Livingstone [New York, NY: Oxford Univ. Press, 1983], 362.

15. Roland Bainton, *Here I Stand, A Life of Martin Luther* (New York, NY: Mentor Books, 1950), 160-161.

16. Lewis W. Spitz, *The Protestant Reformation* (New York, NY: Harper & Row, 1985), 156.

17. Spitz, 226.

18. Jaroslav Pelikan, *The Christian Tradition Vol. 4: Reformation of Church and Dogma (1300--1700)* (Chicago, IL: Univ. of Chicago Press, 1984), 217.

19. John F. Sullivan, D.D., *The Externals of the Catholic Church* (New York, NY: P. J. Kennedy & Sons, 1918), 154-155.

20. The *sign of the cross* or *signing* oneself is also a pagan practice invented by Rome. In Bart Brewer’s tract *Scriptural Truths for Roman Catholics* he states that “Roman Catholic Inventions” include “making the sign of the cross”, invented in AD 300.

21. Karl Keating, *Catholicism and Fundamentalism* (San Francisco, CA: Ignatius Press, 1988), 155.

22. Keating, 40-41.

23. As noted earlier, he also says he glories in it and preaches nothing but Christ and Him crucified. John tells us in his revelation that the Lamb still stands on the altar before the throne of God as “a Lamb as though slain”.

24. Loraine Boettner, *Roman Catholicism* (Philipsburg, NJ: Presbyterian and Reformed Publishing Company, 1962), 286-287.

25. However, I doubt this happened before the last half of this century. Catholics have not been ones to capitulate their beliefs and practices to anyone, much less a Protestant.