

Preservation and Importance of Symbolism: A Panoramic Overview

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Introduction

Symbols are used everywhere and on a daily basis. In many senses, we cannot avoid them because of their function or worth. Although they may not inherently possess value in themselves, their importance arises from what meanings they convey or denote. They vary and are for different purposes such as identity, branding, communication or stand as a memorial. For others, these symbols possess sentimental value evoking inexplicable memories in some instances. These symbols are thus very critical and important though many people down play their importance. Contingent on who is reflecting on these symbols or value attached, these can stand for good or bad. Moreover, perceptions around these symbols or their use can generate mixed reactions in a post modern world, with varying degrees of emotions evoked. For the religious, symbols can be a powerful tool for adherent mobilisation or implanting fear for others. This may not necessarily be true for the atheistic, non religious person as they probably perceive these symbols as mere functional icons. This paper briefly explores issues around Symbols or their value.

The Christian view of Symbols

The Bible harbours many symbols between it's pages and thus uses a lot of symbolism right across it's scriptural land scape. It may further be said that many symbols and all of creation, in general, reflect the glory of God pointing to His nature and being, given that they point to or reveal aspects related to *Yahweh*. They are thus the voice of God in a sense. For the Christian who undertakes to study symbols, various reactions are generated ranging from serious suspicion to scorn but as Cornelius Van Til and others have argued, "*symbols are more important than anything in life*" and are the very definition of it. Additionally, James Jordan asserts that: "*Symbolism is more important than anything else for the life of man*". This may sound very strange to the Christian because most view the study of reality (real factual things) as more important than the study of symbols. In fact, many of them think it is a sheer waste of time. One reason could be that Christians have convinced themselves that these are

too complex and can easily mislead someone. Others think we cannot fully know these symbols so it is prudent to by pass them. Is that the truth? Does this have Biblical support? Is it even wise to hold such notions? Not at all, in fact the Bible itself is the one to guide us into all truth of course as led by the all searching Spirit of God. Man is the primary symbol of God and this can be studied to know God and his creation! Moreover, the Bible is replete with symbols and symbolism, necessitating the study or understanding of them. Klein et al (2017), in their book, *Introduction to Principles of Biblical interpretation*, make this abundantly clear. Granted, symbols may be tricky to exactly ascertain, decipher or explain, they none the less need to be meticulously studied in order to arrive at a correct, sound meaning of a text under consideration, given the genre.

However, it is important to understand symbols and their primary meaning. There is need to know and internalise these symbols and then, and only then shall a correct understanding of life have meaning and direction. There is need to study symbols like trees, stars, shrubs, thorns, clothes etc as to what they intend to communicate or teach. For instance, a tree signifies grace and life with its branches and vegetative cover (foliage). Thorns however may represent God's wrath and lack of favour. Thorns hardly grow upwards but creep on the ground and thus cannot give life. Clothes, on the other hand, not only are to be used to beautify life but are used as a symbol to cover nakedness as well as reflect the rational nature of man among many. Let it be known that symbols are very powerful since they encapsulate ideologies and represent many things.

Three special symbols

According to Jordan B.J, there are at least three primary symbols which God has established that need to be constantly used to remind us of him as well as to provide direction to our lives. If these three symbols are properly understood and administered, they will have a profound impact and effect on our lives. The effect is such that it can also revolutionalise entire generations and in ways that none of us can understand or explain. They will keep the correct things in perspective helping us to put our weight in the right places at the right time. They will generate freshness and keep us relevant to our times. These three primary symbols are:

1. Man (In the image of God and reflects his glory)
2. The Word (Jesus, the way to God)
3. Sacrament (e.g. the Eucharist etc)

These three bring things into perspective and every serious Christian will do well to internalise these and exploit them. Sadly, many people, including Christians, have lost sight of these symbols and keep groping in the darkness because they

use man made symbols and innovations above what God has prescribed. One example, as suggested by Jordan, is placing human preaching above the sacraments. These two go hand in hand and neither of these is superior. Some would object to this claim but that is fine too.

Others have placed intellectualism (which hails from Greek Philosophy) above divine sacraments. Symbols are of different types, some are verbal and others are not but Intellectualism focuses only on the verbal and neglects the non-verbal. This is an error because the non verbal (such as stones, minerals etc) do speak something of the glory of God. In fact, Van Til and others dub *intellectualism* as a heresy! This lopsided view of things explains why the church is weak and faint today and cannot influence the world. We need to give a qualifier here though; symbols are pointers rather than the end in themselves. They serve a specific function, in this case pointing to God.

But there are secondary symbols as well i.e. special words/language, memorials, special roles for men etc. These are symbols created by man (having been endowed with God's wisdom and image). These symbols are things made as a result of what God has created. Strictly speaking, only God can create '*Ex Nihilo*' while man merely makes from what God has already created. There are special and general symbols that might be referred to much like the primary symbols are classified.

The Efficacy of Symbols

Symbols have their time and season. Human made symbols, especially fads or others eventually die. The appeal they initially had may not be the same a generation or two later. Thus to use the same symbols and hope to get the same results is folly and unreasonable. For instance, some insist that going back to the ancient Creeds and confessions authored by men in generations past is not workable, why? Are those symbols useless? Not quite. They have had their day in which they reflected the people's aspirations, responded to heresies and defined churches or people. Today, the context is entirely altered and thus these symbols like confessions may appear irrelevant, good as these things maybe. That does not at all mean we should abandon these symbols, far from it! But what we should do is to learn from the past and thus improve on what was already worked on so that they become relevant to our day. The point here is that symbols fade and die, hence the need to know the times and respond appropriately. How can this "*symbols' death*" be averted and avoided? Simply by returning to the primary symbols that reflect the glory of God. These symbols are timeless and ever relevant regardless of the time and generation.

Practical considerations, lessons and conclusion

Having asserted the points above and in particular with reference to ancient symbols, should we abandon them altogether? Should we stop hymn singing for instance? Far from it!; what we propose is that we learn from the past to reinvent the present and the future. The past is gone and forgotten and cannot thus be re-lived. Secondly, there is need to return to the three divine symbols and fashion our world view around them. Only then will we experience the long desired changes and transformations in our individual lives, churches and communities. Third, some symbols or even icons carry different meanings or connotations today. Not long ago, wearing a crucifix was once viewed as inappropriate for a sanctified Evangelical, much worse for the unsanctified atheist. This picture is entirely altered today. While in one epoch, this symbol reminded one of popery, it no longer does today. If anything, it seems the trendy and 'cool' thing to garb oneself with in these days. The significance of Symbols or symbolism at times changes but the inherent etymological meaning must be sought after at all costs.

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