



More Worship Words to Wrestle With *A Fresh Look at Symbolism*

By Johnold J. Strey

The Wisconsin Synod has come a long way in its nearly 175-year worship history. This article will not attempt to review that history¹, but a brief glance at that story shows a church body whose worship customs have grown from straightforward and simple services to the full liturgical rite we know today. Musical diversity in style and instrumentation is now widely accepted. We also recognize the Word is proclaimed not only by our spoken words, but also in our songs and even in symbolism.

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In this article, we explore the matter of symbolism in public worship. Symbolism is the idea that something we see or say or do represents something else—something larger and more significant than the symbol itself. With symbolism, we depict that which cannot be seen through art, ceremony, music, and even texts.

I've written about symbolism previously.² An essay about symbolism is also included in the new *Christian Worship: Foundations*.³ These resources especially speak to the principles that underlie symbolism in public worship. Without mechanically repeating what has been written previously, this article takes a fresh look at some of the issues raised by common symbolic practices in our midst.

Symbolism Requires Participation

For several years, I have taught classes about worship to seniors at Kettle Moraine Lutheran High School. On the day we discuss

symbolism, I introduce them to a sampling of *The Far Side* cartoons by Gary Larson. Besides the fact that most of the students are unfamiliar with Larson's old comic strip and his unique brand of humor, the benefit of this exercise is that *The Far Side* requires you to "participate" with it to understand the humor. One example: Two dogs are looking at a broken mirror on the ground. One says to the other: "Tough luck, Rusty. Seven years of bad luck—of course, in your case, that works out to 49 years." At the risk of stating the obvious: A reader needs to know the superstition that breaking a mirror brings seven years of bad luck, and that "dog years" are commonly equated to seven years of a human's life. A reader who brings that knowledge to the cartoon will respond with something between an outright laugh and an inward chuckle. But if the reader doesn't know about the superstition or dog years, the cartoon makes no sense. We need to bring a certain "necessary knowledge" to the cartoon for it to be humorous. When we do, there is an "Aha!" moment—the moment when we understand the joke and it causes a reaction within us.

Symbolism works in a similar manner. Symbols—whether in art, ceremony, music, or words—require worshipers to "fill in the blanks." Even though subtle printed explanations can be helpful,

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worshippers must engage with the symbol—observe it, ponder the biblical truth it is meant to portray, and apply it to their own present circumstance. The “Aha!” moment with worship symbolism does not result in a chuckle, but in a personal devotional application of biblical truth. The placing of the funeral pall over the casket communicates to mourners that their loved one is clothed in the righteousness of Christ through Holy Baptism, which gives them confidence and joy amidst their tears. The minister’s raised hands for the blessing communicate that this blessing from God’s Word is not a mere recitation of an excerpt from Numbers, but that this blessing is being applied to God’s people in that assembly and at that moment. When the organist adds a growly, low reed in the pedal (bass) for her accompaniment of stanza 3 of Luther’s *A Mighty Fortress*, many singers will understand that she is depicting the stanza’s opening words which describe a spiritual reality that must keep us on guard: “Though devils all the world should fill, all eager to devour us.”

Just as a lengthy explanation of a joke causes the joke to fall flat, so a wordy explanation of symbolism causes the symbol to turn into mere information. Worshipers’ participation is blunted. But just as a lack of the necessary background knowledge causes a joke to bomb, so a lack of biblical understanding and catechetical truths can result in ineffective symbolism. Worshipers’ participation hasn’t been enabled.

Preaching and teaching must be solid for symbolism to be effective. Worshipers will experience those “Aha!” moments when they observe symbols because they know the doctrinal truths expressed in symbols. But another simple, practical way for symbolism to be more effective is with simple, succinct, printed comments about the symbolism employed in public worship. When space permits and opportunity suggests, an explanation along the margin or in a text box can enable worshipers to fill in the gaps of the symbols they see.

Depicting What Cannot Be Seen

One important value of symbolic communication is that it helps us to depict truths we believe and confess but cannot see. When we baptize an infant, we cannot see the child’s baptismal connection to the death and resurrection of Christ, but the sign of the cross over the head and heart visualizes Romans 6:3, and the lit paschal



candle alongside the font symbolizes Romans 6:4. We cannot see this divine miracle with our eyes, but to communicate its reality, we symbolize it. We likewise cannot see the real presence of Jesus’ body and blood in the sacrament, but the sign of the cross in connection with the Words of Institution not only sets apart *these elements* for Christ’s purpose, but also communicates that the bread and wine we receive are in fact the body and blood of Christ, given and shed for us *on the cross*.

Because symbolism depicts what we cannot see, some common symbols we use might be considered redundant. For example, I once heard someone argue against the use of a unity candle in wedding services. His rationale was this: Marriage is established by the public consent given by a man and a woman. We witness this at a wedding service. We hear this in the vows that they speak to the Lord and to each other. There is no great need to symbolize that which people can hear with their ears and see with their eyes. Not everyone will agree with my acquaintance’s opinion. For some couples, the unity candle is a desirable feature. Others may find it to be anticlimactic after the declaration of marriage. The local pastor will work with couples to determine what makes the most sense in each setting.⁴

Emotional Impact

The way that symbolism communicates engages our emotions far more than words alone. Words especially speak to our heads—the logical side of our being. But symbolism in beautiful art, music, rituals, or poetry has a way of speaking to our hearts—the emotional side of our being.⁵ And that emotional message is powerful—sometimes overwhelmingly so!

At my first congregation, I introduced the custom of the imposition of ashes on Ash Wednesday. I also inherited that as an established custom at my present congregation. What I didn’t sense as a younger pastor is just how powerful the emotional impact of that symbolic ceremony can be—not just for the worshiper, but especially for the minister! What goes through the pastor’s mind when the octogenarian widow comes forward to receive the sign of ashes? What does the pastor think to himself as the cancer patient stands before him? “Remember that you are dust, and to dust you shall return.” Can we speak these words without a lump in our throats?⁶

The imposition of ashes is akin to sticking your finger in a liturgical light socket! We stand inside one another’s personal space. The ashes are physical; the application is personal. “Remember that you are dust” bluntly means “Someday you will die.” Not everyone will be comfortable with its strong *emotional* impact, and that’s okay. My parish makes it clear that participation is optional. It’s fine if a person doesn’t want to “go there” due to the impact of the rite or for any other reason.

The emotional impact of symbolism can be a great blessing that worshipers deeply appreciate. At the same time, be aware that some symbols and ceremonies can impact people so strongly that it leaves them uncomfortable. The careful, caring parish pastor can be a good judge of what symbolic customs work best for his people and how to carry them out. Encourage your people to appreciate the emotional impact, but give them the space they need if the impact is too uncomfortable.

Reassessing Symbols

Do some of the symbols and ceremonies of worship need to be reassessed? Have they lost their meaning and impact? Is the “Aha!” moment missing because the symbol itself is murky or unclear? As with anything, a reassessment of why we do what we do can be a valuable exercise, in this case, to make sure that worship symbolism communicates clearly.

As the hymnal project neared completion, a small group from the Rites Committee met to finalize special occasion services. One of those services was the Good Friday Service of Seven Words, also known as the Service of Darkness, or *Tenebrae*. An issue that the group wrestled with for this service was its ending conclusion. Should a single lit candle be returned to the chancel before people exit, symbolizing the glimmer of resurrection hope that we possess on Good Friday? Should the service end with the *strepitus*, the loud “bang!” sounded in the darkness that some interpret as the sealing of Jesus’ tomb and others as foreshadowing the rending of Christ’s tomb on Easter morning?

Many found the strepitus symbol confusing and unclear.

The group did not agree on a single approach, and so the rubrics of this service in *Christian Worship: Service Builder* are intentionally flexible. I originally advocated for retaining the *strepitus*, but I changed my opinion after my own informal survey of brother pastors and parishioners. A personal email survey is hardly scientific, but it did reveal that many found the symbol confusing and unclear. Still others appreciated these symbols and would regret to see them disappear. My perspective on these symbols changed from, “Let’s encourage this,” to “It’s not always effective, so perhaps it should be optional”—which is reflected in the service’s rubrics.

Another symbol that deserves reassessment is the Advent wreath—particularly its arrangement of candles. As a recent *Forward in Christ* devotional article⁷ indicated, many people wonder about the origin of the pink (technically: rose) candle for the third Sunday in Advent.

The story of the Advent wreath is uncertain; there are at least three theories about its origins.⁸ When the Advent wreath made its way from the home into the church in the early twentieth century, Roman Catholics used colors for the wreath’s candles that



echoed their liturgical colors—purple for most Sundays in Advent, but rose for the third. While purple is understood as a symbol of repentance, rose symbolizes joy. The traditional Introit for Advent 3 from Philippians 4:4 begins with *Gaudete*—“Rejoice!” Now several of the appointed readings for the Third Sunday in Advent in the three-year lectionary also contain thoughts about joy.

There seems to be good reason to believe that the use of rose is connected to the medieval Roman Catholic Church’s lessening of Advent (and Lent) fasting restrictions⁹—a bit of joy and reprieve injected into a somber season, hence the color rose (joy) injected into the otherwise purple (repentance) season. But these practices are not part of Lutheran history and need not affect our own Lutheran liturgical practices. In recent decades, blue, understood as a symbol of hope, has been replacing purple in many parishes during Advent. These realities suggest a different approach to our Advent wreath candles—blue to match the liturgical color or white to reflect the more original Lutheran custom¹⁰, in either case without a rose candle for the third week of Advent.

The rose candle is a well-established custom in many minds and parishes. It is not likely to disappear, so understanding it as a symbol of joy is a devotionally appropriate way of handling this custom and symbol.¹¹ But since its origins don’t necessarily reflect Lutheran history, the rose candle may be worth reassessment and, ultimately, replacement.

The placement of the flag in the chancel can be a touchy subject!

A symbol that stirs up passionate feelings is the American flag. The placement of the flag in the chancel can be a touchy subject! But the flag is a good example of the way symbolism works. No one sees the American flag and thinks only about our nation’s 13 original colonies and the present 50 states. The flag conjures up memories of American history. The flag is viewed as a symbol of the sacrifice of our servicemen, a symbol of freedom, pride, and patriotism. In our current tense political climate, some also consider the flag to be a symbol of oppression.



So let's broach that touchy subject: Does this symbol belong in the chancel? Many people have argued that the freedom of religion we enjoy as a nation is a reason for displaying the flag in the front of the church. It is absolutely true that our congregations have been blessed through that freedom! But other factors also affect our decision. Does a symbol of laudable *national* sacrifice belong in a setting that is meant to communicate *Christ's* sacrifice? Does a symbol with such diverse political interpretations belong in a space where we communicate our unity in Christ? Does a symbol of our nation confuse the truth that the kingdom of God is found within the hearts of people from "every nation, tribe, people, and language"?

Like the other examples in this article, we do not want to be dogmatic about the flag. The debates and battles that might ensue in a congregation might lead worship leaders to rightly conclude, "Let's not take this up at this time." At my own congregation, we recently resolved that issue by placing the flags in a visible place in our lobby. We certainly are not against the flag and what it stands for, but we didn't want the American flag's message to compete with all the other gospel symbols in our chancel.¹²

Final Thoughts

Symbolic communication is not like a doctrinal subscription. We must agree on the teachings of Scripture! We don't have to agree on what constitutes the best symbolic practices in worship. There is room for differing opinions, especially due to differing circumstances from setting to setting. But an honest discussion will prayerfully lead us to look at the symbolic communication that happens in worship with an eye toward the gospel.



Can our art, music, ceremonies, and texts help people to apply gospel truths in a personal way? Can we help our people sense what cannot be seen? Can we touch their emotions as well as their intellect without falling into emotionalism? Can we assess our current practices to make sure that the message perceived is the message we want to proclaim? When we approach symbolism with these questions in mind, the rites and rituals of worship will not fall into ceremonialism but will be a beautiful depiction of the beautiful gospel that proclaims our beautiful Savior.

- ¹ The best resource for a succinct yet thorough summary of WELS worship history is James Tiefel's "The Formation and Flow of Worship Attitudes in the Wisconsin Evangelical Lutheran Synod," in *Not unto Us: A Celebration of the Ministry of Kurt J. Eggert* (NPH, 2001). See also two presentations at this summer's worship conference Prof. Joel Otto's "175 Years of Change in WELS Worship" and my "The Story of The Service in CW21" – welsworshipconference.net.
- ² See "Proclaiming the Gospel in Worship" in *Wisconsin Lutheran Quarterly*, Vol. 105 No. 4 (Fall 2008), particularly part 2, "Proclaiming the Gospel—in Symbol," pp. 256-269; "Worship and the Right Brain" in *Worship the Lord*, No. 79 (July 2016); and *Christian Worship: God Gives His Gospel Gifts* (NPH, 2021), particularly chapter 11, "Symbolism," pp. 199-217.
- ³ *Christian Worship: Foundations* (NPH, 2023) is one of several supporting volumes for the new hymnal; see chapter 16, "Worship Symbols."
- ⁴ A simple symbolic action that can be used with the new marriage rite in *Christian Worship* (2021) is for the minister to place his hand on the joined hands of the couple after the exchange of rings as he prays, "Lord, pour out your blessing..." (p. 272). While subtle and simple, this visualizes the marriage truth that we cannot see, that God (represented by his called servant) is the One who joins husband and wife together as one.
- ⁵ For a fuller discussion, see *Worship the Lord*, No. 79 (July 2016), especially page 2: worship.welsrc.net/download-worship/wtl-practical-ideas-worship. See also *Christian Worship: God Gives His Gospel Gifts*, pp. 202-203.
- ⁶ I am blessed to serve a church with a few retired pastors, seminary professors, and seminary students in the congregation. One of them assists me with the imposition at each Ash Wednesday service. After one year when I choked up while imposing ashes on my wife and children, my family knows that they need to go in the other minister's line on Ash Wednesday.
- ⁷ December 2023, pp. 17-20
- ⁸ Frank Senn, *Introduction to Christian Liturgy* (Minneapolis: Fortress Press, 2012), pp. 211-212
- ⁹ Rose is the Roman Catholic Church's liturgical color for Advent 3 and Lent 4.
- ¹⁰ Senn, *ibid*.
- ¹¹ It is with this understanding that I wrote the devotional articles based on the Advent wreath for the December 2023 edition of *Forward in Christ*. My personal preference is for blue paraments and four blue candles around the Advent wreath. But like many liturgical customs, there is no "one right way."
- ¹² See "Flags in the Worship Space," at worship.welsrc.net/download-worship/worship-the-lord-more-worship-words-to-wrestle-with.