



Keep the Symbols Alive

By Peter Schaewe

The Twelve Days were nearly over. It would soon be time to pack up the ornaments and take down the Christmas tree. So for a few more minutes that evening I sat staring and pondering. I considered my (pseudo-) tree's evergreen (like) branches and their connection to the Tree of Life and eternity. I squinted at the strings of lights and thought, "Jesus is the Light of the world..." "The light shines in the darkness..." I took in the glassy bulbs reflecting the Light to the world and the crafted ornaments picturing the details of the Christmas story or pointing to the cross. I enjoyed the beautiful Christian symbolism of the tree that took me a little farther into my celebration of Christ and of Christmas.

How many people who put up Christmas trees in their homes think about—or even know—the symbolism there? I'm guessing that it's not a really high percentage. Many Americans put up a Christmas tree out of habit, because it's what we do in our culture. It's part of the appropriate "decoration" for the season.

So, is the symbolism of the Christmas tree dying? It's certainly not as meaningful anymore. Symbolism is not effective if nobody thinks about or understands it. The symbol becomes mere decoration.

We don't want this to happen to symbols in our worship. We can't let them die. Many congregations have symbolic artwork in their worship spaces. Are those art pieces effective? Do members appreciate what the symbols represent? Do they even notice them anymore? The symbols in our churches are more than mere decoration. Worship lives can be deepened by symbols, but only if worshipers are tuned in to the bigger thoughts behind the art they see.

What Makes a Symbol?

Before we go further, what makes a symbol? It is helpful to think about the distinction between a symbol and a sign.



This airplane shape is a sign. It's a simple, literal representation of something we know, something tangible. Even somebody who hasn't been educated in

the meaning of this graphic has a pretty good idea the image is telling her that she is close to an airport. There is nothing more to it than that.



This power emblem is more of a symbol. Because power is an intangible concept, not something we can easily picture, a clever graphic designer developed this set of shapes to represent the idea. Now a widely used identifier, this image is helpful to those who know that you can power up your electronic device by pressing such a labeled button. It is, however, not so useful to anyone who doesn't understand what the shapes represent. (It's also not a very deep symbol. The concept of electrical power has lost a lot of its mystery as we have become more dependent upon it in our everyday lives.)

Symbols open us up to concepts that are difficult or even impossible for us to understand.

While signs are meant to be easily read, symbols are designed to take one deeper. That's the beauty of them. Symbols represent ideas, and their visual connections open us up, if even slightly, to concepts that are difficult or even impossible for us to understand.

Making connections—this is the blessing of symbolism in our worship lives. Since the God we worship and so many aspects

Peter is staff minister and art teacher at St. John, Jefferson, WI, and has served as the Worship Arts chair for the last five worship conferences. He is a graduate of Martin Luther College and holds a B.F.A. in painting and drawing from UW-Milwaukee.

of faith are beyond words and pictures, beyond reason and understanding, symbols can help build bridges between our lives of reality and our lives of faith and thus strengthen our worship. We have a cross symbol in the chancel to help us think about Jesus and his sacrifice for us. We have the open book symbol on the lectern to picture God's Word as a means of grace and a guide for our lives. We have the descending dove on the font to remind us of the Holy Spirit and his saving and sanctifying work in us through Word and Sacrament. We have....

Symbols can help build bridges between our lives of reality and our lives of faith.

What do you have? What are the symbols in your worship space? Look at them again with a fresh eye. Ponder them and consider how you can use them to make connections in worship.

The Need for Symbol Education

Many people will look right past worship symbols unless they are taught and reviewed often. A good number of our Christian symbols come from the early Christian church and the Middle Ages, when symbols were used and taught regularly. Most people of that time were illiterate—that is, not able to read and write—but they were quite biblically literate and knowledgeable about the symbolic images that were before them; the church used art to teach truths and to direct spiritual thinking.

That is not the case today. While we live in a very highly text literate and visual culture, we don't live in a symbolic culture or a symbolically literate culture or a biblically literate culture. Of the thousands of images that come at us every day in print or on screens, most are straightforward and meant to be read easily; few are fashioned to be considered for deep meaning or even to be looked at for more than a quick couple of seconds. Today's image-overloaded Americans are not accustomed to symbolic thinking—or they don't take the time for it.

Today's image-overloaded Americans are not accustomed to symbolic thinking.



Powerful symbols can be right in front of us and go unnoticed. It took me years to understand that, in the sanctuary at St. John, Jefferson, the quatrefoil, a four-lobed leaf or flower, is the dominant symbol. Oh, I saw quatrefoils...everywhere. They make up the shape of the windows in the doors that separate the narthex from the nave.

They are carved into the altar and the reredos behind the altar. Dozens of quatrefoils ring the tops of each of our light fixtures. Dozens more line the molding that transitions the walls to the ceiling. Flowers with four petals are the focal point of the stained glass windows in our transepts. When I saw them, though, either I didn't think about them, or I thought about them as a dominant decorative motif for the sanctuary—but not as symbols. I'm sure most of our members were of the same mind. Once I learned that the quatrefoil is a symbol of the gospel, the four lobes representing the books of Matthew, Mark, Luke, and John, I was surprised both at how oblivious I had been and at how beautifully our church designers worked to show the predominance of the gospel in our worship by including not just one, but hundreds of these symbolic shapes in our worship space! Now I love the quatrefoil symbol; I think about it often and point it out to others, too.

I was surprised both at how oblivious I had been and at how beautifully our church designers worked to show the predominance of the gospel in our worship.

In Practice

So, how do we guide 21st century Christians to such "Aha!" moments and deeper worship through symbolism? Here are a few practical thoughts for symbol education.

As Jesus used much symbolic language in his teachings, much of our Christian symbolism is borrowed from his words. Vine and branches, bread, light, salt. Filling ears with Jesus' picture language in lessons and sermons is natural in worship, and it is also easy to direct eyes to a connecting image in a stained glass window or on a banner. Pointing out a sanctuary symbol in the introduction to a service, a hymn, a sermon, or a lesson decodes the presence of that symbol.

A good portion of our symbolism ties to the church year. When we enter a new season, my pastor, as part of his introduction to the service, points out that the paraments in our chancel have changed and gives a brief explanation of the new color's meaning. There are ample opportunities to teach just like this in each passing season: explaining the Advent wreath as part of the midweek Advent service's candle lighting ceremony; noting your altar's empty cross on Easter; highlighting your stole's intertwined rings on Trinity Sunday.

Worship folders and bulletins provide a great space for printed images along with explanations, especially if one's worship space does not house a lot of symbolic artwork. A worship folder's cover art with symbolism that ties to the week's lessons or hymns helps set the theme of the day; a sentence or two about the artwork will help make a secure connection. With today's word processing software and in our Google Image age, copyright-free graphics

for Christian symbols are easy to find, copy, and paste into several sections of worship folders and bulletins.

After thinking about and presenting on the topic of Christian symbolism at the 2011 Worship Conference, I started a special section in our bulletin called “Symbol of the Week.” Here’s the first entry, from the Tenth Sunday after Pentecost, Year A:



Symbol of the Week: Many of our Christian symbols come from Jesus’ teaching and parables—like the parables of the treasure, the net, or the pearl that we hear in today’s Gospel lesson. The pearl “of great value,” which in Jesus’ parable symbolizes the kingdom of God, has also come to represent anything that is rare and of great value in our spiritual lives, including the Word of God and even Jesus himself. Enjoy the pearls that come to you today in your worship.

Most of the time the “Symbol of the Week” was connected to the theme of the day or to a reference in one of the Scripture lessons. Other times the highlighted symbol was seasonal or one of the symbols in our worship space that would otherwise not be reviewed. This section was included in the bulletin for the rest of that three-year cycle of lessons. It will probably come back again someday, but maybe, for variety’s sake, as an educational piece in our church’s monthly newsletter.

Like other spiritual education that the church provides, opportunities for symbol teaching will come outside of worship time, too. Bible study sessions provide opportunities to present Christian symbols and their explanations in many discussions. As a visual learner and lover of art, I like to include some type of image on nearly every PowerPoint slide in my Bible study presentations. I can’t help then but regularly take a minute to point out symbolism or connections. I often get a thoughtful “Oh…” when we make the picture a part of our discussion. Sometimes, even before I get to it, somebody will comment on or ask a question about an image.



Once in a while—again, because I love art and my Bible study attendees appreciate it—an “art break” occurs in the middle of a lesson to show photos of artwork (famous or not-so) that connect with the section of Scripture we’re discussing. It’s a good way to point out symbolism in the art that is not commonly used in our churches today.

Of course, a full study on Christian symbols, their origin and their meaning, is good to have every once in a while on a Bible study schedule. The resources listed with this article give information on materials that would be helpful for such a study.

Consider also how important it is to teach Christian symbolism as part of Catechism lessons and Bible information classes. The growing Christians in these classes can greatly benefit from visual education tied to the doctrines they are learning. Catechism books include a lot of graphics already. Handouts or other visual aids can include more.

We let symbols live by making lessons on Christian symbolism part of the curriculum in our Lutheran elementary schools. Where do these lessons fit? Are they part of Bible lessons, devotions, classroom decoration, art classes? One principal under whom I served had a unit on Christian symbolism as part of his upper grade religion course each year. The study of Christian symbols became such a special topic to him that he has explored more deeply in personal study and has given well-received presentations on symbolism at churches in our area.

Don’t Assume

Teaching and reviewing Christian symbolism is beneficial at all levels. Even our most faithful members may not grasp basic presentations of symbolism. For our last Reformation Festival I set up a symbolic display of the means of grace: the baptismal font on a stand, a big open Bible next to it. Somebody asked our congregational president what was going on, why the font was raised up. Our president relayed this conversation and asked me to be sure to explain whatever symbolism is presented, no matter how simple. I was a little surprised, but I should know better.

You see, I can present artistic symbolism in banners, sanctuary displays, graphics—I can even challenge with uncommon symbolism, like a pelican (Christ’s atonement) or pomegranate (the Resurrection)—but those efforts are wasted if the connecting meaning is only in my head and in nobody else’s. I can’t be like the pop singer who writes cryptic ballads filled with figurative language and then brushes off the baffled questions of fans with, “Whatever it means to you is what it means.” In worship, symbolic meaning is not open to interpretation. It must be explained. It must be clear.

Only then do the symbols live.

Efforts are wasted if the connecting meaning is only in my head and in nobody else’s.

Back to the Tree

The Christmas tree I was pondering had an unusual ornament perched on it—a goldfinch. I happened to find the tiny bird ornament two summers ago at Bronner's Christmas Store in Frankenmuth, Michigan, not long after I had learned about its symbolism. While visitors to my house might look at the ornament and say, "Hmm. Beautiful bird," I look at it and think: Goldfinches eat thorns and thistles—yes, those thorns and thistles listed as consequences of the fall into sin in Genesis 3. Goldfinches devour them, destroy them, just as my Savior Jesus destroys the curse of sin for me. I have another symbol that I now love.

I have put the goldfinch ornament away. But I'll think about what it means to me when it comes out again next year. That symbolism will live with me every time I see it.

Symbolism Resources

Books:

- Murray, Peter and Linda. *Oxford Dictionary of Christian Art*. Awesome resource...not just for symbolism, but for any topic related to Christian art.
- Gray, Doug. *Christian Symbolology*. Much of this book is on christiansymbols.net.
- Fergusson, George. *Signs and Symbols in Christian Art*. —Very comprehensive. It seems like a lot of the websites I found on Christian symbols are "quoting" from this book.
- Baldock, John. *The Elements of Christian Symbolism*. The first part of this book is more philosophical with a good explanation of the nature of symbolism.



- Steffler, Alva William. *Symbols of the Christian Faith*.
- Stoner, Marcia. *Symbols of Faith: Teaching Images of the Christian Faith*. This book includes symbol patterns and activities for teaching symbolism. The cover says that it is "for intergenerational use," so don't think that it's just fun stuff for kids.
- Taylor, Richard. *How to Read a Church: A Guide to Symbols and Images in Churches and Cathedrals*. In addition to information on symbols, this book has summaries of Bible events and people that one might encounter when looking at art in churches.
- VanderMeer, Harriet. *Rings, Kings, and Butterflies: Lessons on Christian Symbols for Children*.—Comes with a CD with of images you can use for your publications
- Whitmore, Carroll E. *Symbols of the Church*. A thin but full book... It's a quick reference.
- Dover Publications has a book called *Christian Symbols* that includes a CD with 456 royalty-free pieces of clip art.

Internet:

- paramentics.com
WELS member Ian Welch is a graphic artist with a site full of art for your worship folders for each Sunday of the church year along with information and art on symbols.
- welsstainedglass.org
View symbols from the stained glass windows of WELS churches. Photographed and posted by Pastor Robert Koester.
- christiansymbols.net
See *Christian Symbolology* by Doug Gray above... It's the same thing.
- planetgast.net/symbols/
A fairly comprehensive listing of symbols with information, pictures (not great but usable) and available patterns for free by email or for purchase on CD.
- google.com (Images)
Type in key words, and you'll find resources and images that you can copy and paste into documents for educational purposes.
- <http://worship.welsrc.net/download-worship/2014-worship-conference/> A Catalog of Christian Symbols—my presentation handout from the 2014 Worship Conference.