

T H R E E

SYMBOLISM AND WORLDVIEW

The study of symbolism is seen by some as a curiosity, rather far removed from the central matters of life. According to them, anyone who spends time studying Biblical imagery and symbolism may well be getting into a “dangerous” area. Persons who engage in an “overly symbolic” interpretation of Scripture are to be regarded with suspicion. What matters is the study of *reality*; symbolism is secondary.

This attitude betrays the influence of the Greek view of the world. According to the Greeks—and actually all pagans—the world was not made by God. Rather, the world, or the raw material of the world, has always existed. This always-existing stuff just *is*, and so it is called “Being.” This “Being” stuff is like a blank slate. It is silent and meaningless “raw material.” It does not bear the impress of any Creator, and it does not joyfully shout His name (Psalm 98:4-9).

How did our present world come about, then? Well, the ancients believed that a designer or maker came along, often called a “demiurge.” This demiurge imposed order on the primeval raw material. He *imposed* meaning, structure, and symbol on the neutral, always-existing world. Human beings, according to the pagan view, are like little demiurges: We go through life imposing meaning and structure and order on the world. Modern philosophy, especially after Immanuel Kant, has taken an even more radical view. The modern view is that there is no demiurge, and that the universe is really ultimately chaotic. Whatever order and meaning there is in the world has been imposed by human beings, and by no one else. We create our own worlds by generating our own worldviews. All meaning, all symbols, are man-made.¹

Very often this approach to symbolism is brought over, unintentionally, into our view of the Bible. It is assumed that the symbolism in the Bible is ultimately arbitrary, not grounded in creation design. More liberal commentators assume that the men who wrote the Bible used the man-generated symbolism of their day to express their ideas. More conservative commentators assume that God just decided arbitrarily to use this or that item to symbolize this or that truth. Such an approach, however, implicitly denies the doctrine of creation, as we have seen it in Chapter 2 of our study. Symbolism is never arbitrary or secondary.

In the Western world for several centuries, men have assumed that the proper way to express truth is by means of abstract, philosophical language. Wherever we find imagery, parable, symbolism, or typology, we ought to translate such language into proper abstractions. This, however, is not how God chose to reveal Himself to us. To be sure, some parts of the Bible are written in abstract language, especially the epistles of St. Paul. Most of the Bible, however, is written in stories, histories, poems, symbols, parables, and the like. As far as God is concerned, this way of revealing truth is equally as important as abstract philosophizing.²

Notice, for instance, the way in which our confessions of faith and catechisms are written. They are virtually devoid of imagery. Solomon wrote Proverbs to instruct youth, but for centuries Christians have used catechisms that consist basically of definitions of terms: What is justification; what is prayer; what is meant by the fourth petition; etc. The contrast of approaches is quite startling. It illustrates for us the problem we have in recovering the Biblical worldview.

The Primacy of Symbolism

Symbolism, then, is not some secondary concern, some mere curiosity. In a very real sense, symbolism is more important than anything else for the life of man. As we have seen, the doctrine of creation means that every created item, and also the created order as a whole, reflects the character of the God who created it. In other words, everything in the creation, and the creation as a whole, points to God. Everything is a sign or symbol of God.

And not only so. Just as everything in creation is a general symbol of God, so also man is the special symbol, for man and man alone is created as the very image of God (Genesis 1:26). Each individual human being, and the race as a whole (Genesis 1:27), symbolizes God in a special way. What is this special way? Theologians have debated the issue, and no one will ever fully understand it (since to do so we should have to understand fully the nature of the God whose symbol we are). All the same, this much can be said: *Man is the only symbol that is also a symbol-maker.* The first part of Genesis 1 is the context in which it is then said that man is the image of God. God has been presented as one who determines, creates, evaluates, names, takes counsel among Himself, etc. These things are what man uniquely images.

Symbols vary. This is ultimately because, as theologians would say, in the *opera ad extra* of God, one or the other of the Persons and/or attributes of God is always highlighted. What does this mean, in simpler language? Well, the *opera ad extra* are the works that God does outside of Himself. Some of these works are more particularly the work of the Father, some of the Son, and some of the Holy Spirit; though in every case all three Persons are active, because "all of God does all that God does." Also, some of these works more particularly show God's wrath, others His grace, others His forbearance, others His jealousy, and so forth; yet in a general way, all of God's attributes are present in each of His actions.³

In a general way, everything in creation points to all three Persons of God, and to all of God's attributes, if we could but see it. But in a special way, each item particularly discloses one or another of His attributes and/or one or another of the Persons.

How are we going to read these symbols? By guesswork? Happily, we have the Bible to teach us how to read the world. The Bible lays out for us the primary symbol of God (man), and four classes of secondary symbols: animals, plants, stones (non-living things), and stars (heavenly bodies). The Bible also discusses angels, though whether angels should be regarded as, like man, special symbols (images) of God, is a matter of theological debate. Since each of these signifies God, it also signifies man, as well. The Bible teaches us how to interpret these symbols, as we shall see in later chapters in this book. Some symbols are verbal

and some are non-verbal. Or better, some are relatively more verbal, and some are relatively more non-verbal. Without words we can never understand anything, so that there must be at least some words to go along with non-verbal symbols. On the other hand, verbal symbols (such as what you are reading) still have shape and sound, and thus are not wholly verbal. We are used to thinking only of non-verbal signs as symbols; but we should realize that all language is symbolic, for words are signs that point to things or relations.

The power of symbols is the power of worldview presuppositions. It is the greatest power in the world. All of language is symbolic, of course, but symbolism is not limited to words. Symbolism "creates" reality, not vice versa. This is another way of saying that essence precedes existence. God determined how things should be, and then they were. God determined to make man as His special symbol, and then the reality came into being. Bavinck puts it this way: "As the temple was made 'according to the pattern shown to Moses in the mount,' Hebrews 8:5, even so every creature was first conceived and afterward (in time) created."⁴

Similarly, man is a symbol-generating creature. He is inevitably so. He cannot help being so. He generates good symbols or bad ones, but he is never symbol-free. Man's calling is to imitate God, on the creaturely level, by naming the animals as God named the world (Genesis 1:5ff.; 2:19), and by extending dominion throughout the world. Notice that naming comes first. Man first symbolizes his intention, conceptually, and then puts it into effect. Symbols create reality, not vice versa. Or, more accurately, for God, symbols *create* reality; for man, symbols *structure* reality. Man does not create out of nothing; the image of God's creativity in man involves restructuring pre-existent reality.

God's actions are *creatively constructive*. He speaks, and it comes to pass. Thus, His symbols are copies only of His character and intentions. Man's actions, however, can only be *receptively reconstructive*. He is to learn God's symbols, and generate his own in terms of God's. Thus, for man, reality reflects God's original symbols, so that man learns symbols in part from reality; but then, man restructures reality in terms of his own symbols (either righteously or sinfully). Always, God's symbols are primary; man's, secondary.

The heart of the Biblical doctrine of salvation lies here. Justification, sanctification, and glorification are inseparable, but which has primacy? Justification. First God redefines us, resymbolizing us as righteous, and then He remakes us. Similarly, Paul in Romans 6 says that we are to reckon ourselves dead to sin and alive to righteousness, and then we will live that way. Symbols bring about reality, not vice versa.

The primacy of the symbolic is not the same thing as the Greek philosophical notion of the primacy of the intellect, for symbolism often does not operate at the conscious or rational level of the human psyche. Symbolism points us to the equal ultimacy of the rational and non-rational in man, and resists rationalistic attempts to shave away the mysterious. To put it another way, the error of intellectualism focuses on the verbal aspect of symbolism to the detriment of the non-verbal.⁵

Three Special Symbols

As a copy of God, man is a symbol-making creature. It is always possible for man to seek to elevate his own symbols to the level of God's, or even replace God's with his own. This sinful tendency has cropped up over and over in the Church herself. To be clear on this, we have to isolate what God's own specially appointed symbols are. All things generally symbolize God, but He also has given three special symbols.

We are told in Scripture that everything is confirmed by the testimony of two or three witnesses (Deuteronomy 19:15). There are, accordingly, three special symbols that God has given which reveal Him to His people. They are as follows: man himself (the image of God), the Word, and the Sacraments.

Satan has sought to pervert these symbols, and thus redirect the history of the world. He perverted the Word in his conversation with Eve. He perverted the sacramental symbols of the two trees, saying that there was no harm in eating from the wrong tree. He perverted the revelation of God in man by bringing man into sin.

Grace restores these three special symbols. Grace gives us the Word of God. The Bible itself can be taken as a testimony of two witnesses, Old and New Testaments. Indeed, historically the Church has appointed two or three readings (Old Testa-

ment, Epistle, Gospel), which are read from two sides of the altar/table, to form the testimony of double witness. The Bible itself is one of the three special symbols.

Grace gives us the sacraments. There are two of them, forming a non-verbal testimony of two witnesses: Holy Baptism and Holy Communion. Indeed, the Lord's Supper itself has two witnessing elements.

Grace gives us redeemed and restored men. The saved are re-symbolized as righteous and whole before God. Here again, we have two witnesses, the royal priesthood (believers) and the servant priesthood (elders).

Books have been written on the interrelationship of the three special symbols: Word, Sacrament, Person.⁶ Here my point is simply this: These are the three special symbols God has set up. The restoration of the whole fabric of life takes place when these symbols are restored to power.

Secondary Symbols

We have spoken of God's primary symbols as special and general. Here, speaking of secondary symbols, we refer to those made by man. Man generates special and general symbols, just as God does. Because of sin, however, man's symbols are often perverse.

God's Primary Symbols:

- Special (Word, Sacrament, Humanity)
- General (the world)

Man's Secondary Symbols:

- Special (special words, special memorials, and special roles for men)
- General (all of life)

Let's look at the three areas or zones of symbolism we have already described. *First of all, language.* Men generate special language symbols when they take oaths, which bind them to certain words. Examples of special man-made symbols are contracts, the U.S. Constitution, and Church confessions. (The subdivision of systematic theology that studies ecclesiastical confessions is called Symbolics or Symbolic Theology.) Men

also generate general language symbols all the time, as in conversation and writing.

Second, non-verbal arrangements, or memorials. Examples of special non-verbal symbols set up by men (analogous to God's sacraments) are liturgies (rites), church architecture, the national flag, national anthem (music), and particular works of art by artists designed to express some particular point or viewpoint. At the same time, men are always making non-verbal arrangements that shape and define their lives, such as their daily routines of life (dance), the homes in which they live, their evening meals, and the like.

Third, men themselves. Here we are speaking of clothing. At the general level, men and women dress themselves to look attractive. At the special level is the uniform, designed to identify a man with a special office or calling (physician, policeman, clergyman). These are ways in which men generate symbols around themselves, to give definition and direction to their lives.

We don't often think about these general symbols, such as conversation, dress, and the arrangement of our furniture. Men do, however, take very seriously the special symbols they create. In modern rationalistic Western society, men do not understand the power of non-verbal symbols and of dress, with the result that they are enslaved by them.⁷ They do, however, generally understand the power of words. Thus, they place great store by their confessions, constitutions, manifestoes, and the like. It's all right to do that, so long as these man-generated symbols do not become more important than the symbols authored by God. Sadly, that is what usually happens, however.

The Reformation of Symbols

At this point it is clear that symbolism is intimately related to worldview. Our symbols create and reinforce our worldview. They pattern our thoughts and lives, often in ways we are not consciously aware. In order to be delivered from enslavement to our modern worldview grid, we must become familiar with the Biblical worldview grid. Learning to see and be patterned by Biblical symbols and habits will give us the perspective we need to evaluate our world, acquire wisdom, and begin to think how to reshape the world and make it more pleasing to God. Quite

clearly, no society can be shaped on a Christian base without the restoration of symbols. We have to give new direction to our culture, and to do that we need to revive our symbols. People understand this instinctively, even if they do not understand it intellectually. Thus, we have movements in conservative Churches to go "back to the confession," and among political conservatives to go "back to the Constitution."

Such movements can be of help, but they can also do harm, and even become idolatrous. This is for two reasons. First of all, history never repeats itself. Man-generated symbols (i.e., the Westminster Confession of Faith, the Belgic Confession, or the U.S. Constitution) have power over the minds of men for a season only. Because God has ordained that men will grow, whether they want to or not, men always outgrow their symbols. We can never outgrow God's symbols, but we do outgrow our own. To attempt to return to earlier symbols, without recasting them, is a rejection of maturity.

Moreover (still on point one), no living man can ever really understand the meaning of an old symbol. No living Presbyterian, no matter how strict and conservative, thinks like the men of the Westminster Assembly. And this is not just true in minor matters, but in major ones as well. The Westminster Confession expressed the Biblical faith in certain terms, in a certain way, against certain errors, at a certain time. It is one of the finest Church Confessions ever written, and should be studied by every theologian. Our long-term goal, however, must be to produce a new Confession that will embrace the greatness of the older documents, and transcend it. Thus, such symbols as constitutions must be administered by living courts from generation to generation. As a result, the constitutions change, until they are no longer functional. The U.S. Constitution is an example. There came a time when the continual interpretation and application of the Constitution by living men gave way to perversion and ignoring of the Constitution. The Constitution no longer has the same power in the minds of men as it did when it was written, and it can never again have such power. It can, of course, continue to function as the foundation of our laws, provided we understand that it inevitably will be reinterpreted from generation to generation, though hopefully within Christian parameters.⁸

The second problem with trying to revivify old symbols is that such an attempt can become idolatrous, if it says that the mainspring of human society lies in man-made symbols, instead of in God's symbols. It is idolatrous to say that restoring the U.S. Constitution is more necessary to social renewal than restoring the sacraments. The key to social renewal, to cultural reformation, to Christian reclamation, then, is this: We must restore the primary special symbols: Word, Sacrament, Persons. That is because only the primary special symbols transcend history, and thus only they can form the wellspring of historical progress.

Conclusion

Practically speaking, does this mean to stop singing in church any hymn more than a hundred or so years old? Stop reciting the Apostles' Creed? Stop using the Westminster Confession (or whatever)? Not at all. The principle of growth means we have to move on, but it also means we cannot move on until we understand our heritage. To try to generate good church music out of the meager vocabulary of American popular music is like trying to generate good theology out of the ideas heard on Christian radio and television. Christian theologians need to acquire familiarity with the whole of the Christian past, in constant contact with the primary special symbols, in order to move forward into new man-made theologies. Christian musicians must know all the music of the Christian past, in constant contact with the primary special symbols, in order to produce good contemporary Christian music.⁹

Thus, earlier man-generated symbols have great value to us, if we do not commit idolatry with them. The preacher must preach his man-generated sermons from the primary symbol (the Word) with an eye to the man-generated symbols of the past as well as the needs of the present. The liturgist must organize his man-generated expression of worship from the primary symbol (the sacraments) with an eye to the man-generated liturgies of the past as well as the needs of the present. The Christian must live his man-generated life out of the example of the primary Symbol (Jesus Christ), with an eye to the godly men of the past and present.

Moreover, at the general level we need a restoration of sight into God's created symbols. We need to learn again how to look at trees, stars, shrubs, grass, snakes, birds, flowers, emeralds, clothing, and all else—look at them with Bible eyes, not with the eyes of Western rationalism. When this has happened, Christians will once again take control of the arts and sciences, but not until then. General cultural renewal is impossible apart from recovering the symbolic worldview of the Bible.

Only then will we see renewal in the Church (the primary institution) and in society (secondarily). Judgment begins at the House of God. Restoration begins when men take His primary symbols seriously once again.