

Symbolism: A Manifesto

by James B. Jordan

The study of symbolism is seen by some as a curiosity, rather far removed from the central matters of life. Anyone who spends time studying Biblical 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.

From the Biblical point of view, however, the reverse is the case. Symbolism is more important than anything else for the life of man. Since this is a manifesto, let me repeat that statement in italics: *Symbolism is more important than anything else for the life of man.* Anyone who does not understand this has yet fully come to grips with the philosophy of Cornelius Van Til, or more importantly, with the biblical doctrine of creation.

How can I write this so confidently? Simple. 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. In short, *everything is a sign or symbol of God.* The idea that everything is a symbol of God, His character, nature, ways, etc., is the foundation stone of the philosophy of Cornelius Van Til. The doctrine of creation *ex nihilo* is the basis of the Van-tillian doctrine of natural revelation.

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 (Gen. 1:26). Each individual human being, and the race as a whole (Gen. 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 which is also a symbol-maker.¹ Since this is a manifesto, let me say that again: *It is of the essence of man's divine imagehood that he is a symbol-making creature.*

¹ The safest way to precede is to note what is said about God in the preceding verses of Genesis 1. This 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.

The Variety of Symbols

Symbols vary. This is 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.

Here again we have the bipolarity of the special and the general, which runs through everything in the Christian worldview. 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. These are animals, plants, stones (non-living things), and stars (heavenly bodies). Since each of these signifies God, they also signify man as well. The Bible teaches us how to interpret these symbols, though precious little work has been done in this area.

To take an example: trees and thorns. Trees generally point to the grace of God, and thorns to His wrath. They are opposites. They show up in Genesis 2-4. Trees form a ladder from earth to heaven, showing the grace of God which enables His work to be done “on earth, as it is in heaven.” Thus, trees show up repeatedly in Scripture in association with Godly people, such as Abraham, Deborah, Nathaniel. To sit under the tree is to be under God’s especial watch-care, and also to be one who passes judgment at the “gate of heaven” which is at the bottom of the “ladder of heaven” (by analogy to Genesis 28:10-22). Trees show the vegetable kingdom in its fullest growth. They start small, grow tall, are crowned with glory, and bear fruit — thus, a picture of humanity in its maturity of righteousness. God filled His garden with trees, as signs to Adam and Eve, and made two special trees as signs of His grace and intention (especially the Tree of Life).

Thorns are trees in cursed form. Just as trees came out of the ground, now thorns will come up (Gen. 2:9; 3:18). Just as man was made out of the ground (to be a true tree, Gen. 2:7), so now men will be born who will be thorns (the first fulfillment is Cain, Gen. 4:1-8). Thorns do not grow up toward heaven. They crawl along the ground. They do not produce fruit, but thorns². They visibly demonstrate the wrath and curse of God, when compared to stalwart trees. They certainly cannot signify a link between earth and heaven. They provide no leafy canopy signifying protection.

² Can we see a demonstration of grace when even thorny plants have beautiful flowers, or berries?

Symbolism: A Manifesto

We could speak of other zones of symbols also. The use of animals to signify the life of man in Scripture is so common as not to require comment. The use of stones is a bit less common, but we can immediately think of God the Rock, and of the Church as made up of gold, silver, precious stones (whose rainbow hues encircle the throne of God in the book of Revelation, since His Temple is constructed of them.) The use of sun, moon, and stars is frequent enough also. Indeed, God had told Abraham that his seed would be like the heavenly bodies, and just so, when Israel came out of Egypt and camped around the Tabernacle, the census numbers of the tribes corresponded to the synodical periods of the sun, moon, and planets in various combinations. (Biblical Horizons offers an essay by M. Barnouin, originally published in *Vetus Testamentum*, which discusses this in detail.) Now, we could go on with this, but we've gone far enough. Symbols vary. That's our point.

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. (If this essay had been published in a scholarly journal instead of a newsletter, for instance, you might treat it more seriously!) 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

The power of symbols is the power of ideologies. 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.

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 (Gen. 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, and 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 symbols are creatively constructive. He speaks, and it comes to pass. Man's symbols are to be receptively re-constructive. 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

Symbolism: A Manifesto

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, glorification — all are one package deal. Yet which has primacy? Justification. First, God redefines us, re-symbolizes 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 notion of the primacy of the intellect, for symbolism often does not operate at the conscious or rational level of the human psyche. Symbolism entails the equal ultimacy of the rational and non-rational in man (as Van Til might put it), unlike the intellectualist heresy which tries to shave away the mysterious. To put it another way, the heresy of intellectualism focuses on the verbal aspect of symbolism to the detriment of the non-verbal. When this happens in the Church, preaching is seen as far more important than the doing of the sacrament as a memorial of Christ. Property speaking, however, these both belong together.

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. (Remember the special and the general. 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. In my opinion, so-called Hebrew parallelism as a literary device flows from this basic fact of existence, as does the doubling of the Hebrew verb "for emphasis" (verbal pleonasm; Heb. 6:13-18). The fact that God sees fit to confirm His word with an oath-sign (sacrament) is not a condescension to our weakness, but a reflection of His Trinity.

There are, accordingly, three special symbols that God has given which reveal Him to His people. They are: 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 Testament, 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.

Symbolism: A Manifesto

Grace gives us the sacraments. There are two of them, forming a non-verbal testimony of two witnesses: Holy Baptism and Holy Eucharist. Indeed, the Lord's Supper itself has two witnessing elements. Under the influence of the heresy of intellectualism, the integrity of the non-verbal witness of the sacraments has been under assault, and the sacraments have come to play second fiddle to man-made preaching. Thus, God's symbols have been subordinated to man's!

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 general officers and the special officers. These correspond to wives and husbands, since it is the unique position of the special officers to represent the Heavenly Bridegroom before the Bride during the sacred dance of divine worship (which is why no woman may be ordained to special office).

Books have been written on the interrelationship of the three special symbols: Word, Sacrament, Officer. We are not writing a book. Our 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.

There is one matter, however, which we should address. Two of the special symbols, the Word and sacraments, are means of grace. These particularly show forth Christ the Bridegroom to His Bride, the Church, and the Church (redeemed humanity) is properly passive before her Lord. The officers in the Church (which also represent the Groom to the Bride) are not themselves means of grace to the Church, but rather *administer* the two-fold gracious witness. Thus, at one level there is the testimony of two symbols (Word and sacrament), while at another level there is the testimony of three (man, Word, sacrament). If this seems mysterious and/or confusing, it is because we are in the realm of the created reflection of the Divine Triunity. We should not expect to understand everything here.

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

Man's Secondary Symbols:

Special (special words, special memorials, and special roles for men)

General

Symbolism: A Manifesto

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 themselves to certain words. Examples of special man-made symbols are contracts, Church confessions, the U.S. Constitution, and the like. 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 the liturgy, the flag, national anthem (music), church architecture, 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, which 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 (thus, they are enslaved by them). They do, however, generally understand the power of words. Thus, they place great store by their confessions, preachings, constitutions, manifesto, 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.

Symbolic Reconstruction

Quite clearly, from what we have seen, no society can be reconstructed 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 are ill-founded, and ultimately they can become idolatrous and blasphemous.

Let me repeat that: *Any movement to restore the confession or the constitution is always ill-conceived, and ultimately can become idolatrous and blasphemous.*

How dare I say that? Simple, and for two reasons. First of all, history never repeats itself. Man-generated symbols, such as 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*

Symbolism: A Manifesto

always outgrow their symbols. To attempt to return to earlier symbol without radically 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.

But the *Westminster Confession* is a corpse. Let me repeat: *The Westminster Confession is a corpse.* We can learn a great deal about living bodies by studying cadavers, and we must study old, dead symbols (which no longer compel the hearts of men) if we are to give direction to the living Church of today. Our goal, however, must be to produce a new Confession which will embrace the greatness of the Westminster documents, and transcend it. Since history moves by generations, my suspicion is that the power of any such man-generated special symbol lasts about a generation, before it dies into traditionalism and sterility.

Thus, such symbols as constitutions (and for Presbyterians, the WCF functions also as a constitution) 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 power in the minds of men, and there is no point in trying to go back to it.

(Part of the problem here is also the desire to have a government “of laws, not of men.” This is nonsense. Government is always by men, for men must administer the symbols. We want good men, not bad ones; but we shall always have men. Thus, any appeal to the Constitution by a tax rebel or anyone else, ultimately is an appeal to men, which is why such “Constitutional arguments” never win³. The notion of a government “of laws, not of men” is a Stoic, pagan, non-Christian fiction; it cannot work, and it does not work. We want good laws, and we want good men. Man-generated laws, however, must flex with the situation, unlike Biblical law.)

But there is a second problem with trying to revivify the corpse of old symbols. It is that such an attempt too often is idolatrous and blasphemous. It says that the main-spring 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

³ As a tactic, a Christian before the tyrannical state may obviously try to use the Constitution, just as Paul used all his Roman rights to get to Caesar, Paul did not, however, argue that the institution of Caesarism should be abolished in the interest of going back to the Roman Constitution, the Twelve Tables. Paul realized that history does not ever go backwards. He appealed to the “powers that be” for his time. To the (marginal) extent that the U.S. Constitution is still a power in our day, it would not be wrong to appeal to it, as a tactic. To seek its restoration, which is the professed goal of most of the “tax patriot” movement as a whole, is foolish.

Symbolism: A Manifesto

than restoring the sacraments. It is blasphemous to say that man generated preaching (based on the Word) has priority over God's sacraments. (On preaching, notice that Jesus taught as one possessing authority, not as the scribes? The scribes [preachers] are ministers and servants of the Word; Jesus is the Word. Preachers expound the Scriptures; Jesus authored them. See Mark 1:22 with Matthew 23:2-3. Incredibly, I have heard preachers say that they are like Jesus, and not like the scribes!)⁴

The key to social renewal, to cultural reconstruction, to Christian reclamation, then, is this: *We must restore the primary special symbols.* That is because *only the primary special symbols transcend history, and thus only they can form the wellspring of historical progress.* To go back to the *Westminster Confession*, or to the U.S. Constitution, is like a college student going back to the twelfth grade to learn grammar. He may have to consult his twelfth grade grammar textbook to brush up, but he has no business trying to recapture the experience of the twelfth grade, and go no farther. It is ridiculous to imagine.

But what do we see? Conservative Christians not only study their past and learn from it (good), but also blow the trumpet for some centuries-old Confession, which can never have the impact today that it once had. Conservative Americans not only study the U.S. Constitution, but want to go into court and fight to have it restored. Such endeavors make good tactics on occasion, but if they become long-range strategies, they become idolatrous.

We'd better face the fact that the situation is a whole lot worse, and a whole lot farther gone, than is imagined by most conservative Christians and Americans. No superficial restoration of man-made symbols is going to do the trick, and to pour one's efforts into such endeavors is a waste of time. What is needed is a study and re-articulation of God's three primary symbols. When men once again think in terms of God's symbols, then we shall have new man-generated symbols relevant to our age.

Practical Considerations

So then, does this mean to stop singing in Church 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

⁴ In the Western Churches, man-produced preaching (*application* of the Bible) has tended to become more important than God-given sacraments. In the Eastern Churches, man-produced liturgies and forms (applications of the sacraments) have tended to become more important than the Bible.

Symbolism: A Manifesto

contact with the primary special symbols, in order to produce good contemporary Christian music.

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. 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. 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 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.

(The Geneva Papers were published every month by Geneva Divinity School. Address: 708 Hamvasy Lane, Tyler, TX 75701. A donation, tax deductible, is requested. Checks should be made out to The Geneva Papers. Permission to reproduce these sermons, in whole or in part, is granted, provided the name and address of The Geneva Papers is included.)