

AN APPRECIATION  
OF  
SYMBOLISM  
IN  
CHRISTIAN EDUCATION

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AN APPRECIATION OF SYMBOLISM

IN

CHRISTIAN EDUCATION

By

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A Thesis

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CHAPTER I

I N T R O D U C T I O N

# AN APPRECIATION OF SYMBOLISM

IN

## CHRISTIAN EDUCATION

### CHAPTER I

#### INTRODUCTION

##### A. The Statement of the Problem

Early Protestantism tried in every way to be different from the Roman Catholic Church. In this desire to be entirely separated from this church, it also did away with much of the great heritage of symbolism. The problem is: does symbolism have a part in the Christian education of the Protestant Church, and if so, what is its unique contribution?

##### B. The Delimitation of the Subject

To exhaust the field of study, it would be necessary to study symbolism in its very earliest forms, through its evolution, its significance in church and secular history, up to the present time. As this would be entirely impossible in a paper of this length, it is necessary to delimit the subject. Symbolism should be studied in art, music, painting, and poetry to present a complete picture of the problem, but the main concern of this thesis is symbolism in architecture as a means of Christian education. It will attempt to show the heritage of ancient symbolism and the use to which it can be put in Christian education today.

### C. The Importance of the Problem

Because symbolism has not been understood by the greater majority of the Protestant people, it has always been connected with the Church of Rome and thus, not to be used in the Protestant Churches. Protestantism has thereby lost a great deal of the beautiful and the worshipful by this neglect. We live in a world of symbols. Why not, then, use them in our churches, provided they are used wisely, if they will in any way enrich our experience of God? Symbolism wrongly used is both dangerous and injurious to the symbol and to the beholder, but taken with understanding and used in the right way, it can become men's tool for expression of the intangible. Christian symbols have a spiritual meaning that can take men out of themselves into an experience with the Great Creator. They can lead to worship and enable the mind to grasp something that cannot adequately be expressed by words. Christian symbolism has great potentialities and is seeking its rightful place in the curriculum of Christian education.

### D. The Method of Procedure

As civilizations are so closely united within each other, and the influence of one passes over into the other, it is necessary to study symbolism through the various ages. Primitive man, without adequate words, had to incorporate all his senses into expression. Thus, symbols were born. Symbolism has played such an important part through all generations that it is increasingly desirable that its historical significance be understood. Christianity, although not incorporating the pagan symbols, has been enriched by them. Practical suggestions will be made for the use of symbols and their value in teaching today.

#### E. The Sources of Data

The material is gathered from the available sources written on this subject. Much is taken from the Bible, and the material in the field of Christian education is used. Also use is made of the allied arts.



CHAPTER II

DEFINITION AND HISTORY OF SYMBOLISM

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DEFINITION AND HISTORY OF SYMBOLISM

A. Definition

1. Hidden Meaning

There are many meanings to the word "symbol." The one to be considered now is the hidden meaning. The hidden meanings of symbols are those that are open only to the initiated few, as in the Masonic Order. There is a hidden meaning in their emblem, the square and compass, with the meaning known to the members, but those outside of the Order do not understand its significance. All life is surrounded by the symbols of hidden meaning. The stop signal is another illustration of this. A person from a foreign country not being used to the idea of a green light for "go" and a red light for "stop" would not understand the meaning of the signals in this country until informed by some person who knew their meaning. Trains are run by the use of symbols. The engineer talks to the brakeman at the end of the car by blasts of his whistle. A waving lantern conveys another message. The motorist coming to these same railroad tracks sees the cross-armed bar and the swinging wig-wag and instantly knows a train is approaching. This is nothing more than the hidden meaning of symbolism.

As symbols in the secular world play an important part, so do they in the religious world. These symbols, at times, are even more hidden than those of the secular world. In the first century it was the custom to find out if a person were a Christian by saying the word "fish" to him. If he were a Christian, he would reply in like manner. The fish taken by itself had no meaning at all, but when spoken by Christians who were thinking of Christ, the word took on

added meaning and became their hidden pass word.

Today churches do not need signs painted upon them saying, "This is a church." When the eye rests upon the beautiful stained-glass windows and the high tower pointing the beholder to God, immediately the mind knows it is a church. Even the structure, with its straight walls and roof coming to a point, symbolic of the hands in prayer, tells this. The ring insignia of The Biblical Seminary in New York, a small figure of a sower on a black onyx stone, has hidden meaning, but to those who know the parable of our Lord Jesus Christ about the sower and the seed, this symbol has a great deal of meaning. To the "uninitiated," this symbol may also create a desire to know its meaning. A returned missionary from India tells the story of an Indian woman on a train who saw the ring of the Seminary and wondered what it meant. Thus, the whole Gospel story was told to her because she first noticed a symbol, the Sower.

Likewise, the Cross holds deep meaning for the Christian. It reminds him of Jesus Christ, taking the way of the Cross for man's sins; but shown to a group of Indians, Chinese, or any other group that has never come in contact with Christians, it means nothing.

## 2. Abstract Ideas Expressed

Religion is of the Spirit, and often the ideas of religion cannot be adequately expressed except through the medium of symbols. Words cannot cover the outward things that have an inner meaning. Parables are symbols pointing beyond themselves in meaning, and our Lord made great use of them in His teaching. He called Himself the Bread of Life and the Living Water, thus, personifying in Himself the substances without which man cannot live. He put into words, symbols

in themselves, thoughts that could be grasped in no other way than through symbols. A person is seen kneeling with his hands folded, and no one needs to be told that he is in prayer. Something is going on within, but the posture is the outward sign. People coming into the great New York Harbor see the Statue of Liberty, but they do not think of the many books written on liberty, freedom, and democracy. They see the "Woman with the Light" and feel all that the country of America stands for in truth, freedom of ideas, and religion. These cannot be expressed in words, but there is an inner stirring at the sight of "Her." Symbols help us with the abstract conceptions. Truth, as an abstract idea, needs concrete aids in order to make itself known. God, to many minds, is intangible. He is not seen, touched, or His voice heard; yet, to Israel in the wilderness, He expressed Himself through the symbol of the cloud by day and the pillar of fire by night. Symbols convey one beyond the realm of experience.

### 3. Fixed or Arbitrary Ideas

Often symbols have a connection with the thing symbolized and are directly representative of that object, but at other times, they have no connection. The first would be the fixed symbol, and the latter, the arbitrary. Examples of the fixed symbols are seen in the caduceus, the sign of the physician. This was carried by Mercury and was supposed to have magical powers over dreaming, waking, and sleeping. Fixed symbols are also attached to certain objects or people by their attributes, such as: Mercury, a messenger of the gods, with his winged sandals; Jupiter, the thunderbolt; Bacchus, the god of wine, with grapes in his hand; and Apollo, god of the sun, with a chariot of fire driving across the sky. Certain men of the Bible are known also by their symbols.

Examples of these are: Moses with the Law tablets; Jonah, the whale; and the Lamb as Christ. The four evangelists have had various symbols, but the ones most common are derived from the Apocalypse. These are Matthew, the winged man; Mark, the winged lion; Luke, the <sup>winged</sup> ox; and John, the eagle. The twelve apostles were at first represented together as twelve sheep with Christ in the center, bearing a lamb in His arms. Later their symbols became distinct. Two other fixed symbols are those of Peter with the keys, and Paul with a sword, and at times, two swords. The greatest fixed symbol of the Christian Church has always been the Cross of Christ.

Arbitrary symbols are a little more difficult to classify, but they may be seen in these examples. Words are symbols, and they are always arbitrary. There is no relationship between the two silver bars on the uniform as a rank of the first lieutenant; nor an oak leaf for major; nor the star on the conductor's sleeve showing how long he has been in the service. Not so much in the United States, but elsewhere, a family is symbolized by an individualized coat of arms. An interesting Christian arbitrary symbol is seen in the lantern painted in "The Light of the World" by Holman Hunt. The lantern, one of the fixed symbols of our Lord's betrayal, here pictures conscience. These symbols are purely arbitrary and are generally attached by social custom or fiat.

#### 4. Purpose of Symbolism

Symbols, through all ages in pagan nations, have been used for their educational value. In the early Christian Church in the catacombs, the greater number of people did not know how to read. As the truths of Christianity were passed on, there had to be some system of teaching. The answer came in the use of symbols. There were two

reasons for this: one, it was not so dangerous to use symbols for they could be read by only the initiated of the faith; two, the whole story of the symbol and that for which it stood could be told at a glance. No lengthy theological discussions were needed here. Even to the most, illiterate, the story was clear and the symbol in itself had powerful educational value. Another purpose is advanced by Webber:

" . . . it was not so much an artistic urge that prompted Medieval craftsmen to cover their great churches with such extraordinary carvings and symbols, as it was an ardent desire for publicity. They wanted to express their current religious beliefs in a manner that all might see and understand."<sup>1</sup>

Not only is symbolism used in these ways, but it is a great means of beauty; beauty that is filled with meaning.

## B. History of Symbolism

### 1. Egyptian

Symbols are handed down from one civilization to another and made by the succeeding race to fit into the pattern of its religion. This is particularly true of the Egyptian symbols.

The only mode of expression for the <sup>early</sup> Egyptian was the symbol, whether in writing or in art. The lotus flower was used a great deal, but had no religious significance to these people. Taken over by the later Egyptians, it came to have religious meaning as the reproductive power of all nature. One of the earliest symbols used was that of the serpent. This symbol of power was used by the king who had the power of life and death. Outspread wings was another symbol often used as indicative of the protection and care over the king. The horns of a

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1. F. R. Webber: Church Symbolism, p. 16. ✓

ram were among their religious symbols. One of the most important phases of the Egyptian worship was animal worship. Here the most important symbol was the cow, or bull. One of the most noted is Aphis or Memphis. Nature worship was also common in Egypt. Nut, the goddess who gave the waters of life, was supposed to have her home in the tree of the sky, which was the sycamore tree. The lion, a constant companion in battle, was considered the noble and royal beast, and his figure is often seen on the sides of the throne. Perhaps the most important symbol of the Egyptians, to this study, is the ankh, the symbol of life. It later developed into the Latin cross, typical of that upon which the Savior gave His life in order that we might have eternal life.

## 2. Babylonian

The gods of the Babylonians were numerous and as it is the desire of the human heart to have some concrete idea in which to place his trust, there were many statues of gods. These were not symbols alone, but had become the very god, itself, to the people. This is seen in a letter discovered in the Tell el Amarna concerning the goddess of passions, Ishtar of Ninevah.

"Tushratta, the king of Mitanni, at the request of the king of Egypt, sent him the statue of Ishtar of Ninevah, together with a letter in which Tushratta exhorts Amenophis to treat Ishtar with honour and allow her to return with joy just as though the statue were the goddess herself."<sup>1</sup>

The great god of this country was Shamash, the sun-god. As was common among the nations of antiquity, the symbol of fire was used as divine. Not only was the sun, as fire, worshipped, but also the trees. The tree through all ages has been to man his shelter from the hot sun,

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1. M. H. Farbridge: Studies in Biblical and Semitic Symbolism, p. 14.

the storm, and perhaps the village meeting place. It is no wonder that this plays such a large part in the symbolism of these early peoples. One of the most important trees in Babylonian history is the cedar. This was under the special protection of Ea, the god of wisdom, whose visit to them was the most sacred. As water is the great life-giving force in the East, each tree had its own subterranean deep. Ea was the god who gave these streams of life, and had the power to restore strength and vitality to the body. Another symbol of life is the palm tree. This tree grows well in an arid climate, and the best fruit is from the tree that has reached the age of a hundred years. Cylinders have been found which show other trees, such as pomegranates, cypress, and also vines. Flowers, too, played an important role in their symbolism. The lotus which grew upon the tree of life opened itself every morning to the warm sun's ray, and was thus represented as the flower of life.

"As man was driven to learn the properties of plants and flowers in the earliest period of his existence he soon found that according to their usefulness, their taste, or any peculiarities in their growth, they became a real language to him, and the names which he gave them became symbols of these phenomena . . . man . . . sought to express through the instrumentality of flowers his love of purity and beauty, or to typify through their aid the ardour of his passionate desires . . . The flower represented to the Oriental all the mysterious phenomena connected with birth, reproduction, and fecundity; whilst warmth and life which are obtained from the sun were symbolized by various symbolical flowers."<sup>1</sup>

Animal symbolism and worship was also prevalent among these people. The beast was worshipped, not as the beast itself, but the qualities personified by it. Some of those most frequently represented were bulls, dragons, lions, and serpents, all symbolic of protection. One theory of the origin of animal symbolism concerns the temple. The

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1. Farbridge: op. cit., pp. 28-29.



temple was considered the dwelling place of the god, and the great doors were the doors of heaven. These massive doors, set in stone sockets, opened or closed producing a grinding and groaning sound. The noise suggested the cry of animals and was associated with the animals carved on the building. Bull worship has always had an important place in the ancient worship. Its great strength and vitality were the qualifications for honor.

"In Babylonia the bull was a symbol of strength, and the spirit which guarded the approach to public and private buildings was therefore supposed to have a bull-like form."<sup>1</sup>

The god Nergal, of the burning sun, was symbolized by a lion. The lion was also symbolic of courage and sovereignty with its fierceness used to overcome enemies. The serpent is closely connected with the tree of life.

"A very familiar example of the serpent in Babylonian mythology is a seal with two beings seated on either side of a tree, and a serpent behind one of them. This was once regarded by many scholars as being the Babylonian representation of the Hebrew account of the fall. Some of the Babylonian deities were intimately associated with the serpent, and we have representations in which the body of a god is formed from the coils of a serpent. On some seals a bearded god with the body of a serpent holds a branch in his hand. Although the meaning of this is not clear, the important part which the sacred tree occupied in Babylonian mythology leaves no room for doubt that this is symbolical."<sup>2</sup>

### 3. Grecian

It was to the temple that the Greek applied all the architectural skill that he had in his possession. It was his supreme achievement. As in the previous studies, Egypt and Babylonia, Greece had its tree worship. Certain gods resided in certain trees and gifts and offerings were brought to them. Garlands adorned the trees and

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1. Farbridge: op. cit., p. 62.
2. Ibid., p. 73.

often altars were built in front of them. Mountains, rivers, air, fountains, and caves were also believed to be inhabited by the gods, the mountains, Olympus and Parnassus, being particularly favorite places. In the early history of the nation, the gods were rather impersonal, but later it developed that they took on human form and the natural outgrowth was to build a suitable dwelling place for the gods. The many local shrines became the center of Greek worship. Each shrine was an end in itself; each god was independent of all other gods. The Greeks thought of their gods as their statues portrayed them in the form of gold and ivory images. So closely were the god and the image related that often the image was bathed and clothed as part of the worship. There was also animal worship as the later descriptions of the gods indicate: Hera, as cow-eyed; Athens, the owl; Zeus, the eagle; and Artemis, the bear, are cases in point. The Greek animal and nature worship did not attain to the degree of prominence as that noted in the cases of the Egyptians and the Babylonians in their worship, and it is interesting to note that the former was almost entirely done away with when in later Greek history the symbolized forms took on human forms.

#### 4. Roman

The Roman worship was a composite religion and did not originate with them, for they drew from all, especially the Greek, Italic, and Etruscan. Their religion was suited to a hard-headed, unimaginative, practical people. The worship of nature, as such, was rapidly dying away at this time, and in the earliest period, the religion was mostly that of agriculturalists and stock-raisers. The gods were impersonal, but it was thought best, nevertheless, to keep on the good side of them, and thus, many feasts and festivals were held in their honor.

There was a system of sacrifice where animals, principally sheep, bulls, and swine were offered to a god. As the religion developed more and more, different things were added. In a time of national crises, when the Roman gods did not satisfy, new gods were taken from other countries, especially Greece. These gods were kept outside until they dropped their Greek name and were given Roman names. Some of these gods with their symbols were Neptune, the sea god with sea weed hair and a pitch fork; Ceres, goddess of farming with wheat in her hand; Minerva, with the balance as wisdom and justice; and Vesta, goddess of the sacred fire with a bowl of fire. Now that the way was open, more gods came in until they were all there, but under Roman names.

"Rome had enlarged her pantheon until it seemed literally to include all the gods of the countries with whom she was in touch. Most of these gods were brought in at some time of stress. They did not come in deliberately to take the place of the old Roman gods, but to perform some function for which no Roman god seemed prepared. The very idea of deity was changed by this process, the Romans coming in the end to look upon their Greek gods with Latin names just as the Greeks looked upon them, personalities like men and women, with images and temples in which they lived. The old ideas and practices languished and the city was filled with new forms of worship."<sup>1</sup>

Rome was fast becoming the world empire and with her great masses of wealth, religion, such as it was, began to lose its place. The old ceremonies were not followed and the offices of religion fell into disuse. Then Augustus Caesar came to the throne.

"One of the events which mark his reign was the revival of religion. It was largely his own work. Augustus recognized that without religion a country is lost. He revived old ceremonies, filled offices which had been unoccupied for years, rebuilt temples, and in every way sought to restore the religion to its old place of power in the life of the people. He brought in some new features, the most remarkable of which was Caesar-worship. At first it was worship of

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1. E. D. Soper: The Religions of Mankind, pp. 127-128.

the dead rulers of the past, then of the living emperor sitting on the throne in Rome. It was not called exactly by that name; the Romans would have resented such a bald statement as too much of an innovation. The proposal was to worship the 'Genius' of the emperor, the shadowy counterpart of the living man which was more or less spiritual and other-worldly. This was not quite so much a shock to their sensibilities, but it was only a step removed from the actual worship of the emperor himself. This became the one universal form of religion and the touchstone of loyalty to the empire."<sup>1</sup>

The Roman worship was empty for the people. It was discipline of the State and the ceremonies of the people. They did not have to believe in the gods, but they did have to conform to the public ceremonies. In spite of the emptiness of Roman public worship, some gods were still held in respect. Among the most important of these were the lares and penates. These were household gods and cared for one's personal effects. They, also, supposedly protected each family, and were symbolized by the family seal.

#### 5. Jewish

The Jewish history is full of symbolism, but it is a very different type of symbolism than those that have been studied, and their worship can in no way be compared to the worship of the four preceding countries, Egypt, Babylonia, Greece, and Rome. Since the founding of the Jewish nation, Jehovah has been worshipped. True, they have at times forgotten Him and turned away, but they have always turned back again, and through it all they have known the true God. The Old Testament is full of symbols and actions with symbolic meaning. When words were not adequate expressions of thought as they are now, the people combined actions with them.

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1. Soper: op. cit., pp. 129-130.

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"But as man found that words are altogether inefficient to give expression to the infinite contents of the human soul, and as in primitive society the art of writing as giving lasting and permanent expression to one's ideas and thoughts had not yet developed, there arose the necessity for symbolical actions as a means of accompanying and supplementing human speech. One can gather the necessity for symbolical actions from our present-day forms of intercourse amongst men. Even nowadays speech is often accompanied by gesture; and various parts of the body, the hands or the head in particular, are used to illustrate or emphasize one's thoughts or meaning. How much more must these gestures have been necessary in early times when human speech had not yet reached the stage of development it has attained today! Scholars are agreed that from the very earliest times, 'the audible word has been accompanied by the visible gesture.' In fact, in many cases symbolical actions really preceded human speech, for the thoughts which stir man's mind to adopt such actions are already there and express themselves forcibly before he possesses sufficient verbal power to make them clear to his neighbor; so that the symbol shows clearly all that he does and is before he is able to express his thoughts in words. Again the symbolical action served another purpose. At a period when the art of writing had not yet developed the symbol took its place and was used as a means of creating an indelible impression on the mind of man."<sup>1</sup>

An example of this would be in the taking of an oath. The Hebrews lift up one hand toward heaven, symbolic of the throne of the Deity Who is witness of the making of the covenant. Another symbolic act was the placing of the hand upon the thigh of the adjurer. When an agreement was broken or the debt paid, a ceremony took place where the tablets were broken before both parties. Some of the most beautiful symbolism in the Bible concerns that of nature. There are numerous mentions of herbs, flowers, and trees. Flowers were used for the decorations and the embroidery of the Temple and the Tabernacle. As in the Babylonian and the Egyptian symbolism there is the tree of life, so in the Hebrew is the tree spoken of:

"And out of the ground made Jehovah God to grow every tree that is pleasant to the sight, and good for food; the tree of life also in the midst of the garden, and the tree of the knowledge of good and evil."<sup>2</sup>

. . . . .

1. Farbridge: op. cit., pp. 6-7.
2. The Holy Bible: Genesis 2:9.

Christ is referred to in Isaiah as the Branch. Another tree of significance in the Bible is the palm tree. This was used greatly in the decoration of the Temple. The tree is highly symbolic with many meanings attached to it, for wherever it is found there is water also. The fruit refreshes the weary traveler and because its best fruit is of its old age, it is a sign for one to do well and flourish in his old age. The tree later became the symbol of the Jewish state in Judea. The olive tree was always spoken of as a symbol of beauty and strength. The post and the lentil of the temple were to be made of olive wood. When the dove returned to Noah, it had an olive branch in its beak as the symbol that God's wrath had been taken away. Not only was it a symbolic tree, but very useful in everyday life. This tree produced enormous quantities of oil and the timber was of a rich amber colour. The oil was used for anointing, a ceremony dedicating a child or a building wholly to Jehovah. It also had great healing powers and was widely used for wounds, as seen in the case of the good Samaritan. The vine is another plant which is symbolic in the Bible. It symbolizes the nation of Israel and when mentioned in connection with the fig tree, presents an image of wealth, beauty, and prosperity. When Israel was full of peace and tranquility she was spoken of as dwelling under the vine and the fig tree, but when she became disobedient to God, she was the wild vine:

"Yet I had planted thee a noble vine, wholly a right seed: how then art thou turned into the degenerate branches of a foreign vine unto me."<sup>1</sup>

. . . . .

1. The Holy Bible: Jeremiah 2:21.

Perhaps the tree with the greatest symbolic significance is the great cedar. This tree, like the palm, loves the water and is an evergreen. It is a symbol of height, and makes vigorous growth.

"It is sound to the very core, the roots of the tree are expansive, and being firmly fixed in the soil, it is enabled to withstand the violence of storms. It is always covered with leaves, and its bark and leaves are highly aromatic, and the 'smell of Lebanon' has become a proverb for fragrance. Everyone who has seen these noble trees recognizes the force of the glorious and majestic imagery of the prophets. With their gnarled and contorted stems, and their foliage rather in layers than in flakes, with their dark green leaves shot with silver in the sunlight, as they stand, a lonely group in the stupendous mountain amphitheatre, they assert their title to be monarchs of the forest."<sup>1</sup>

Other trees with symbolism attached are: the almond, when shown to a prophet, indicates God is bringing His word to pass; the myrtle, one of the best known in the Bible, was regarded as a symbol of joy, peace, and tranquility. The willow has two meanings. When Israel was in times of joy, it was so used, but when they were in trouble, the weeping willow was represented. Wormwood is still used by the Hebrews as a symbol of moral bitterness, distress, and trouble.

Animal worship did not have a place in Israel, but there are instances of the false worship of Jeroboam who made two calves and set them up as the "gods" which brought the people out of Egypt. In the early patriarchal age there are no references to bull worship. The serpent is the symbol of evil and in the Bible is connected with the tree of life. Unlike today when the dog is spoken of in terms of faithfulness and fidelity, then it was almost always regarded in contempt. Other animal symbols are the he-goats as the leader of the flock, symbolizing the rulers and rich over against the poor people.

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1. Farbridge: op. cit., p. 43.

The wolf is always the symbol of cruelty and bloodthirstiness. Among the birds the dove has the principal place of importance. It is peace-loving, kind, and true.

The bird which symbolizes victory is the eagle. It is spoken of by the prophets in comparison to the care of God for Israel:

" . . . God is said to have taught Israel as the eagle trains her young. This alludes to the fostering care of the eagle for her young. When the eaglets are old enough to fly, she stirs up her nest and compels the young birds to fly to some neighboring crag. Then she flutters over them, teaching them to move their wings and to sustain themselves by their movements. If she finds them weary or unwilling, she spreads her wings, takes her brood upon her back, and soars with them aloft. The eagle is said to be the only bird endowed with this instinct, and the whole of her procedure is taken by the Hebrew writers as suggestive of instructive lessons in relation to the dealing of God."<sup>1</sup>

Because of its great strength and its ability for long flight, the eagle is also a divine symbol.

#### 6. Early Christian

To discover the rich heritage of Christian symbolism, one must go to the Catacombs. The first century Christians were facing a hostile government and had to seek hidden ways to express their teachings about Christ. This was done through the medium of symbols. These had meaning for the "inner circle," but were a foreign language to those outside:

"From the Catacombs of Rome, where the early Christians were accustomed to assemble for prayer, and to bury their dead in secret, through fear of the enemies of their religion, we derive our chief knowledge of the first efforts of Christian art, which consists of bas-reliefs on sarcophagi, carvings on grave-stones, and painting on the walls and ceilings. There, with the imperfect means at their command, they expressed the thoughts and facts of their religion in symbols which remind us of the language found on more ancient monuments, and the meaning of which was hidden from their persecutors."<sup>2</sup>

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1. Farbridge: op. cit., p. 82.
2. L. Twining: Christian Symbols and Emblems, lx, Intro.



As the Old Testament had been translated into Alexandrian Greek at an early date, many of the earliest paintings were of these stories. The two dominant ideas of the Catacombs, death and sin, were at first portrayed by these Old Testament characters. The familiar story of Noah was the symbol of salvation, and Jonah, the resurrection. Another reason the Old Testament had preference over the New Testament stories was the newness and sacredness of the events in the life of Christ. Graphic representation did not begin to appear until the second century:

"There is still another reason why the Old Testament preceded the New in furnishing the themes of the nascent Christian art. It is becoming more and more evident that the early centuries of our era were familiar with illustrated copies of the books of the Old Testament, and that these picture-books were first produced in Alexandria where the first Greek version of the Old Testament was made. The earliest books of this sort were of course in roll form, and a copy of one of them, the famous Rotulus of Joshua . . . still exists in the Vatican Library."<sup>1</sup>

The favorite representation was the figure of Christ as the Good Shepherd. It was used most frequently and so continued through all the ages of the persecutions. The Good Shepherd is seen in various situations. In some places, He is pictured with a house upon His shoulders, upon other occasions at the head of a grave, and again with a lamb:

"(The Good Shepherd) appears for the first time in the early part of the second century in the crypt of Lucina; and later very frequently in frescos or sarcophagi, and as an independent status, upon gold-glass, upon rings, upon medals, and in almost every branch of art. Nothing could have comported better than this symbol with the spirit of early Christian art, and the mode in which it was treated was highly characteristic. When this subject is represented in our modern art, the character of the shepherd is but a slender disguise; it may be denoted by nothing more than by the fact that he carries a lamb and has a shepherd's crook, while

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1. C. R. Morey: Christian Art, pp. 7-8.

for the rest it is the ideal face and figure with which we are accustomed to depict Jesus in all the scenes of his early life. There was nothing like this in the art of the catacombs; the symbol was frankly carried out, -- it was a symbol and no whit more. The insufficiency of art to portray in realistic terms the figure of the God-man was clearly recognized, as we have seen, and this feeling was frankly expressed by a form of representation which could not even suggest the idea of a physical likeness. What was represented in the catacombs was just such a shepherd as might be seen in the compagna about Rome, a beardless lad of some sixteen years, clad in the short sleeveless tunic of the laborer, with his right shoulder bare, sometimes with feet and legs bare, also, sometimes with shoes and stout leggins. There was a perfect realism about the representation, and yet, at the same time, a certain idyllic graciousness--it has been not unjustly called an hieratic trait--which distinguishes it from the same subject as it appeared in pagan art. The statue in the Lateran is altogether the finest example of the Good Shepherd . . . with both hands he holds a sheep upon his shoulders; one shoulder is quite bare, for he wears the tunica exomis, which is girded up to the knees, as it commonly was; at his side he carries the shepherd's scrip."<sup>1</sup>

The symbol next in importance is that of Noah's ark, represented by a little box, much too small for the man sitting in it. The figure in the box was not always a man, either, but was at times a woman, and often a name was ascribed. Such as that of "Juliana":

"The meaning of this is quite obvious. 'Nobody doubts,' says St. Augustine--and Tertullian and St. Cyprian had said the same before him--'Nobody doubts that the Church was typified in the ark of Noe, though this might have appeared a mere conjecture of man's imagination, had not the Apostle Peter expressly declared it in his Epistle.' The survivors, therefore, of Juliana, and of every other person buried in the Catacombs on whose tombs this story was told, meant to express their sure faith and hope that their departed friend, having been received in the Church by baptism, and lived a faithful member of it, had died in the peace of God, and had now entered into his rest."<sup>2</sup>

The anchor has been found on many graves and is the symbol of hope. ". . . we have as an anchor of the soul, a hope both sure and stedfast . . ."<sup>3</sup> It is often formed in such a way as to suggest a Cross, the very Hope of the Christian faith. The symbol of the fish and the

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1. W. A. Lowrie: Monuments of the Early Church, p. 217.
2. J. S. Northcote: Epitaphs of the Catacombs, pp. 159-160.
3. The Holy Bible: Hebrews 6:19.

anchor were often combined and when taken together added much meaning. The fish has always been a symbol of Jesus Christ and is derived from the Greek, where the initial letters of the Christian creed, Jesus Christ, Son of God, Savior formed the word "ichthus" meaning fish.

" . . . the combination of the fish . . . with the anchor is very suggestive of Christian thought. It brings to our minds the words of our Blessed Lord, that 'when He was lifted up on the Cross, He would draw all men unto Him:' the fish are here Christian souls swimming towards that which is the center and loadstone of their affections, the Cross of Christ."<sup>1</sup>

Other symbolism found is that of immortality, seen in the peacock; a ship, sailing to a light house as the soul enters its haven of rest; and the crown, the joy awaiting each completed Christian life.

The pagan crypts were filled with sorrowful symbols which looked back, but the Christian ones were filled with joy and hope which was set upon the Good Shepherd.

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1. Northcote: op. cit., p. 163.

CHAPTER III  
SYMBOLS IN THE BIBLE

## CHAPTER III

### SYMBOLS IN THE BIBLE

#### A. Old Testament--The Tabernacle

The symbolism in the Old Testament and especially in that of the tabernacle is unique in the entire Bible. Each object was filled with meaning and the completed whole a source of worship and inspiration.

"No other structure was ever erected on our ruined earth, in the building of which God manifested such an interest, and in preparation for which, so much care and pains were lavished. But we know that God does nothing in vain. We know, too, that He never overestimates the importance of any thing. His estimate of things is the true standard by which we are to form, and correct our own judgments. Surely then, when we see what an amount of care and time God was pleased to bestow on the preparation of the tabernacle and its furniture, we may well feel that the consideration of it should receive our most careful and attentive study. . . It was a structure of divine origin. The Jewish Tabernacle was indebted for nothing to the force of Man's creative faculty. It was not an imitation of any other earthly structure. It had its origin in heaven. God--the Great Architect of the universe--planned it. The design was His, both in conception, and in the development of all its details. Moses had nothing to do but copy the model set before him, and carry it out, in all its minutiae. No part, or portion of it was left for him to fill up. From the glorious cherubim overshadowing the mercy-seat, down to the cords and stakes which sustained the walls of the outer court, everything was to be made and fashioned 'according to the pattern showed him in the Mount.' Such was the NATURE of this structure."<sup>1</sup>

Picture the situation of the children of Israel. They had come from the land of Egypt wandering many days in the wilderness. All the time assurance was given of the Presence of God by the symbol of the pillar of fire by night and the cloud by day. Now, God was giving them something more, the Tabernacle.

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1. Richard Newton: The Jewish Tabernacle, pp. 14, 29-30.

"An Jehovah spake unto Moses, saying, Speak unto the children of Israel, that they take for me an offering: of every man whose heart maketh him willing ye shall take my offering. And this is the offering which ye shall take of them: gold, and silver, and brass, and blue, and purple, and scarlet, and fine linen, and goats' hair, and rams' skins dyed red, and sealskins, and acacia wood, oil for the light, spices for the anointing oil, and for the sweet incense, onyx stones, and stones to be set, for the ephod, and for the breastplate. And let them make me a sanctuary, that I may dwell among them. According to all that I show thee, the pattern of the tabernacle, and the pattern of all the furniture thereof, even so shall ye make it."<sup>1</sup>

The ark, the first object to be made and the most sacred in the Tabernacle, was completely overlaid with gold, inside and out. Four gold rings placed on the legs of the ark were for the staves which enabled the priests to carry the ark when Israel was on the march. The whole was made of acacia wood. This tree grew in the wilderness and was not subject to decay, thus its incorruptibility symbolized the everlastingness of God. Gold, in all ages, has been the most precious metal. It bears a high polish and does not rust. Thus, it is seen that the gold of the ark symbolizes the divinity, glory, and unchangingness of God. Placed within the ark were the tablets of stone, the code of Law by which Israel was to live before her God. The ark had in all things the pre-eminence for it was the symbol of the Presence of God.

The mercy-seat, also of pure gold, fitted over and above the ark. Its crowning feature, the two golden cherubims, faced each other with out-spread wings covering the seat. The true meaning of the seat is best seen from the Hebrew word.

"In the Hebrew Bible, it is the word capharet, or cophareth, from the word copher. This, in its strict or primary sense, means to atone for sin, to expiate, or forgive sin. In its secondary, or

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1. The Holy Bible: Exodus 25:1-9.

metaphorical sense, it means to cover sin. And this gives us the true scriptural sense of pardon as resulting from an atonement. It is the putting away, or hiding of sin--the causing of it not to appear."<sup>1</sup>

How beautiful this becomes when taken in the light of its true meaning. Every year at the day of Atonement the High Priest came into the Holy of Holies and there sprinkled the mercy-seat with blood, indicating the covering over of the sins of the people. As the Holy of Holies was a type of heaven and the Ark God's throne, so the cherubims were ministering spirits symbolizing heaven's glorious beings and redeemed man. These things, the ark, the mercy-seat, and the cherubims, taken together form a breath-taking, symbolic picture. The ark with the great tablets of stone, reveals God's kingdom to be based upon law, judgment, and righteousness, but not alone; for the law and judgment are crowned by the Shekinah glory symbolizing God's Presence, His mercy and great love for His people.

The table of showbread, made of acacia wood and overlaid with gold, had placed upon it several utensils: the plates for bread, bowls for wine, and spoons or cups for the frankincense. The bread was sometimes called the "bread of the presence" for it was continually before God. Over the top of the loaves frankincense was sprinkled and burned every Sabbath morning when new loaves replaced the old. As bread is a vital substance, it symbolized Israel's necessity of dependence upon God for their existence and also, called to their remembrance the sufficiency of the bread in the wilderness.

The six-branches candlestick, made from a talent of pure beaten gold, was fashioned in one piece. The cups, holding the oil,

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1. Newton: op. cit., p. 366.

were made as almond blossoms, which symbolized God's promises were coming to pass. It is not known what the knobs just below the cups were, but Josephus declares them to be pomegranates. If this is correct, the pomegranate with its many seeds is the symbol of fertility and life. The seven cups or bowls, six branches and one in the center, were filled with pure olive oil that had been beaten, instead of the usual grinding, to make the oil more fine. Seven constantly burning lights symbolized God's covenant of grace. The light resulting from these seven bowls is also symbolic of the character of God, "God is light, and in Him is no darkness at all." The tabernacle curtains, of fine twisted linen, were to be ten in number. The lovely colors; blue, the symbol of revelation, loyalty, and truth; purple, denoting royalty with dignity and honor; scarlet, pictured sacrifice. These curtains joined together by fives and coupled with fifty gold clasps, made the tabernacle one whole. The goats' hair curtains covered the cherubim curtains, but did not have any special symbolic significance. These and the other covering curtains were the protection against the rigors of the wilderness. The veil, separating the Holy of Holies from the rest of the tabernacle, was of the same material and colors as the cherubim curtain.

The two altars, one of gold and one of brass, fulfilled very different missions. It is first necessary to understand the Hebrew meaning of the word altar.

"The Hebrew word for altar is one which conveys the idea of sacrifice. It comes from an old root which signifies to slay, or to slaughter. So that when the Hebrew spoke of the altar, the very term which he employed told him of a place, where sacrifices were offered, where blood was shed, and life was taken away.

"The other phrase, used to designate this piece of furniture of the tabernacle, was 'the altar of burnt offering.' The Hebrew word for



burnt-offering denotes that which ascends, or mounts up, as the flame and smoke did on this altar, when the victim was consumed upon it. That which was presented on the brazen altar, was a whole burnt-offering. Everything connected with it ascended, or went up to God."<sup>1</sup>

The golden altar, or the altar of incense, fashioned of acacia wood and overlaid with gold, was placed before the veil of the Holy of Holies and incense, the symbol of prayer was burned continually upon it. The brazen altar, or the altar of sacrifice, built of brass, stood outside the tabernacle proper, but within the court and was for the sacrifice of animals. These two altars, the gold and the brass very different in their construction and materials, were filled with much significance. The former, small, and the latter, large; one, for the sacrifice of animals and the shedding of blood to make atonement for the sins of God's people, the other, filled the tabernacle with the fragrance of sweet spices telling the people of their high calling in God.

The laver of brass stood before the tent of meeting and the brazen altar. This was filled with water and used by the priests to wash themselves before they entered the tabernacle. Water, so important as the life-giving agent in this wilderness was pressed into the service of God. The laver and the washing of the priests were symbolic of purity, and a holy and righteous God must be worshipped in all purity and truth.

After the completion of the tabernacle, Jehovah commanded a holy oil to be made. This crowning feature of the anointing of the tabernacle set it apart from all other parts of life, and symbolized its complete dedication to God.

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1. Newton: op. cit., pp. 57-58.

B. New Testament--The Book of Revelation

As the Book of Revelation is written mainly in symbols it has been chosen to present the symbolism in the New Testament. Many scenes could be depicted, but the ones taken for the consideration of this study are: the Christophany, the Theophany, the Four Horsemen, and the White Horse and its Rider.

"And I turned to see the voice that spake with me. And having turned I saw seven golden candlesticks; and in the midst of the candlesticks one like unto a son of man, clothed with a garment down to the foot, and girt about at the breasts with a golden girdle. And his head and his hair were white as white wool, white as snow; and his eyes were a flame of fire; and his feet like unto burnished brass, as if it had been refined in a furnace; and his voice as the voice of many waters. And he had in his right hand seven stars: and out of his mouth proceeded a sharp two-edged sword: and his countenance was as the sun shineth in his strength."<sup>1</sup>

John turns and sees Jesus Christ in all His glory. As the picture is almost more than can be described, he has drawn widely from the Old Testament prophets for his words of description. The seven golden candlesticks represent the seven churches to whom John is commanded to write, Smyrna, Pergamum, Thyatira, Sardis, Philadelphia, and Laodicea. These candlesticks are not as the candles of today, but were oil pots burning with a constant light. The churches, having the message of truth, are to be the lights of the world. The garment down to the foot denotes a mark of rank, dignity, and authority. It represents royalty in Christ's Kingship and Priestliness, in His office of High Priest. The golden girdle, another aspect of the priestly garment, is girt around at the breast showing One who has entered into rest and sovereignty, and not as the toiler and runner whose tunic is girt at the waist. The gold also is expressive of regality and authority.

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1. The Holy Bible: Revelation 1:12-16.

The white hair, symbol of divine purity and agelessness, crowns the figure. In direct contrast to the whiteness of the hair are the eyes of flame. This pictures fierceness against adversaries and also piercing the innermost secrets of the heart. There is a keenness of intellect and all knowledge is His whose eyes are as a "flame of fire." The gaze next comes to rest on the feet. These feet of burnished brass have gone through the fire and have stood the test. They signify strength and power. The voice of many waters is as unchanging surge of the tide of the sea. It is a deep, awe-inspiring sound to hear the movement of the restless waves and tells of irresistible power. Held in the right hand are the seven stars. This portrays Christ's protection and care. As the number seven symbolizes completeness, so is His control complete. From His mouth the sharp two-edged sword tells of the destroying power of Christ's word and the judgment which none can escape. The dazzling splendor of Christ's countenance is symbolic of the heavenly glory and of His majesty. This completes the whole glorious picture of the risen Lord and His glorified position in heaven.

"Straightway I was in the Spirit: and behold, there was a throne set in heaven, and one sitting upon the throne; and he was like a jasper stone and a sardius; and there was a rainbow round about the throne, like an emerald to look upon. And round about the throne were four and twenty thrones: and upon the thrones I saw four and twenty elders sitting, arrayed in white garments; and on their heads crowns of gold. And out of the throne proceeds lightnings and voices and thunders. And there were seven lamps of fire burning before the throne, which are the seven Spirits of God; and before the throne, as it were a sea of glass like unto crystal: and in the midst of the throne and round about the throne, four living creatures full of eyes before and behind. And the first creature was like a lion, and the second like a calf, and the third creature had a face as a man, and the fourth creature was like a flying eagle. And the four living creatures, having each one of them six wings, are full of eyes round about and within: and they have no rest day and night, saying,

"Holy, holy, holy, is the Lord  
God, the Almighty, who was and  
who is and who is to come."<sup>1</sup>

This scene is laid in heaven and God is seen on the throne surrounded by heavenly hosts. Only the attributes of God are seen and not He Himself. The first attribute, the jasper stone, is not like the stone called jasper now. It was clear as crystal and because of its sparkling brightness symbolized the holiness of God. The sardius, a fiery red stone, signifies God's avenging wrath. The rainbow, like an emerald, round about the throne looks back to the covenant with Noah and is symbolic of God's never-ending mercy to His people. The four and twenty elders were round about the throne also. The symbolism of numbers has always had a place in the Bible, and this is a very good example of it. The number twenty-four must be broken down into twelve to get its true significance. Twelve is made up of four threes or three times four, and three is the number of enough, or many, thus representing a complete number. The number four also represented a complete number. This idea was derived from the cardinal points of the compass and was a symbol of the earth. The twenty-four elders in their completeness, with white robes and gold crowns represent the twelve Old Testament patriarchs, the twelve New Testament apostles, and the condition of the glorified position of God's people. The lightnings, voices, and thunder proceeding out of the throne are symbols of God's divine judgment. The seven burning lamps, which are the seven Spirits of God, are the Holy Spirit which is ever before the throne of God, active in searching with His judgments and purifying power. The crystal sea has

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1. The Holy Bible: Revelation 4:2-8.

no special symbolic significance, but adds glory and majestic beauty to the whole scene. The four living creatures as the whole creation, picture the lion of nobility; the calf or ox of strength; the man for intelligence; and the flying eagle denoting swiftness and power. The worship of these same four living creatures brings this wondrous look into heaven to a mighty close.

"And I saw when the Lamb opened one of the seven seals, and I heard one of the four living creatures saying as with a voice of thunder, Come. And I saw, and behold, a white horse, and he that sat thereon had a bow; and there was given unto him a crown: and he came forth conquering, and to conquer. And when he opened the second seal, I heard the second living creature saying, Come. And another horse came forth, a red horse: and to him that sat thereon it was given to take peace from the earth, and that they should slay one another: and there was given unto him a great sword. And when he opened the third seal, I heard the third living creature saying, Come. And I saw, and behold, a black horse; and he that sat thereon had a balance in his hand. And I heard as it were a voice in the midst of the four living creatures saying, A measure of wheat for a shilling, and three measures of barley for a shilling; and the oil and the wine hurt thou not. And when he opened the fourth seal, I heard the voice of the fourth living creature saying, Come. And I saw, and behold a pale horse: and he that sat upon him, his name was Death; and Hades followed with him. And there was given unto them authority over the fourth part of the earth, to kill with sword, and with famine, and with death, and by the wild beasts of the earth."<sup>1</sup>

These four horsemen personify in themselves four plagues or pestilences that will be visited upon the earth. The picture of the first horsemen tells of the victorious warrior coming forth on his white horse. Through the ages the mighty men of battle have announced their conquest by riding through the streets on white horses. The bow in his hand symbolized the Parthian nation of whom the Romans were afraid at this time. The crown, another symbol of conquest, was given to him showing him to be militarism triumphant. The second horseman comes forth on a red horse taking peace from the earth with the large sword of war. Red, the

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1. The Holy Bible: Revelation 6:1-8.

color of much bloodshed, shows the great slaughter of the war that is to follow. Following war, the black horse of famine stands before John's eyes. The balance in his hand goes to the idea of "eating bread by weight,"<sup>1</sup> showing a great scarcity of food. Unlike the Western world where wheat and barley play such an important part, the East lived by the oil and the wine. Every home had its olive tree and grape-vineyard. Thus, the symbolism here denoted the price of wheat and barley to more than three times the normal price, but the wine and the oil were not to be hurt. This showed that the famine was only partial and not complete destruction for the people.

"The world of St. Paul: the world of the olive tree! . . . This tree's ancestors distilled blessing upon the nations: in the eye of history an enormous amount of humanising culture stands crowned with the olive branch. The tree of Homer, the tree of Sophocles, the living symbol of the unity of the Mediterranean coast-world, the olive tree is also the tree of the Bible, of the Old as well as the New Testament, and in the names 'Mount of Olives' and 'Gethsemane' (that is oil-press) as also in the titles and names 'Messiah,' 'Christ' ('the anointed'), the influence of the olive tree extends to the deepest associations and the most sublime words of our sacred tradition. Without provision of olives, moreover, the world-wide journeyings of St. Paul would be inconceivable; on his voyages especially the fruit of the olive tree must have played the same part as it does still today on the Levantine steamers and sailing ships, particularly for the sailors and deck passengers. A handful of olives, a piece of bread, a drink of water--the Levantine requires nothing more."<sup>2</sup>

The last horse, the one of pale color, expresses Death. He and his following of Hades bring with them the power and authority to kill with the sword, famine, and death. The pale color of the horse suggests the ashen complexion of the face when bleached by fear or terror, or even in death itself. The rider, Death, is busy in many ways bringing his destruction to the earth. More calamitous are these ravages of

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1. The Holy Bible: Ezekiel 4:16.
2. Adolf Deissmann: St. Paul: A Study in Social and Religious History, pp. 39-40.

human life, even the adding of the wild beasts which pictures the depopulation of the earth allowing them to roam at will.

Here pictures are the evils of the world when man is not in tune with God. The conqueror, wishing power for himself, sets forth on a campaign to win the earth. Following, inevitably, in his footsteps the results of selfishness, greed, and pride in self are war, famine, and finally, death.

"And I saw the heaven opened; and behold a white horse, and he that sat thereon called, Faithful and True; and in righteousness he doth judge and make war. And his eyes are a flame of fire, and upon his head are many diadems; and he hath a name written which no one knoweth but he himself. And he is arrayed in a garment sprinkled with blood; and his names is called The Word of God, And the armies which are in heaven followed him upon the white horse, clothed in fine linen, white and pure, And out of his mouth proceedeth a sharp sword, that with it he should smite the nations: and he shall rule them with a rod of iron: and he treadeth the winepress of the fierceness of the wrath of God, the Almighty. And he hath on his garment and on his thigh a name written, King of Kings, and Lord of Lords."<sup>1</sup>

The picture of this horseman is very different from the ones previously considered. He, the final conqueror, most Holy and Righteous, is Jesus Christ, appearing as the warrior Messiah. The One sitting on the white horse, symbol of victory, called Faithful and True, rides forth to judge and make war with evil. Faithful and True shows the ideal character of this royal commander, Who comes first to judge with righteousness before He makes war on the evil powers, for Divine judgment precedes victory. The eyes of flame go back to the first vision of Christ in the Christophany and with the same meaning of all knowledge and wisdom. A new feature has been added, the diadem which signifies many crowns. This fact is all the more striking when compared with the crown offered to Christ by Satan and which He refused. The hidden name was believed,

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1. The Holy Bible: Revelation 19:11-16.

by ancient people, to have supernatural powers and through it enemies could be overcome. Another interpretation is that the human mind cannot grasp the great significance of the Son of God and only He, Himself, can understand the mystery. The garment sprinkled in blood carries with it the idea of the blood-stained robe of the 'Lamb of God,' but this whole scene depicts Christ as the Warrior and Judge more than as the Redeemer. "The Word of God" exemplifies Christ as the only, perfect, and final view of God to man. Those with Christ, clothed in white and mounted on white horses, are the heavenly beings which accompany Him in battle. They have no part in the fight because for them death is impossible. These are not the saints, for Christ is seen as the Heavenly Warrior, and these are His angels that He brings with Him. The sharp sword, seen before in the Christophany, is the method by which the judgment will come.

"The sharp sword issuing from the mouth of the Word fulfills a new purpose. The Priest-King, walking in the midst of the churches, uses it to chastise the impertinent members of the Asian congregations. Here its work lies beyond the pale of the Church; the Warrior-King comes to smite the pagan nations with it. The Word of God fights with the sword of the word; His weapons are spiritual and not carnal; He smites the nations not by judgments only, but by the forces which reduce them to the obedience of faith."<sup>1</sup>

After Christ's enemies have been subdued, they will be ruled by a rod of iron from which there is no departure. The treading of the winepress vividly pictures God's vengeance upon the wicked. Isaiah also expresses the same idea:

"Wherefore art thou red in thine apparel, and thy garments like him that treadeth in the winevat? I have trodden the winepress alone; and of the peoples there was no man with me: yea, I trod them in mine anger, and trampled them in my wrath; and their life-blood is sprinkled upon my garments, and I have stained all my

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1. H. B. Swete: The Apocalypse of St. John, pp. 250-251.



raiment. For the day of my vengeance was in my heart, and the year of my redeemed is come."<sup>1</sup>

The last of the three names in this passage is for all to read. The first, known only to Christ Himself, the second, for the Church, and the last, for all who will see Him coming in His glory, both the Redeemed and the unredeemed. The name is in a conspicuous place, the garment which falls over the thigh, and places Christ in His rightful position of Glorified Sovereignty.

How rich these passages have become through the interpretation of symbolism. Sin is graphically portrayed, but with it all comes the glorious picture of the conquering Christ and His ultimate victory over the powers of Satan.

1. The Holy Bible: Isaiah 63:2-4.

CHAPTER IV

USE OF SYMBOLISM IN CHRISTIAN EDUCATION TODAY

## CHAPTER IV

### USE OF SYMBOLISM IN CHRISTIAN EDUCATION TODAY

#### A. Introduction

Adults, as well as children, need to come closer to God and have a better understanding of Him. Symbols help in this way. The very church building is built upon symbols and not just the liturgical or Roman Catholic, but nearly all churches embody these means of expression whether they are cognizant of it or not.

"The Medieval cathedrals and parish churches of Europe have been called 'sermons in stone'; and indeed they are. But they are not the only churches which speak. Every church has its message, but it is intelligible only to those who understand the language. It is possible to converse in a very limited fashion through signs and motions, and similarly the structure and appearance of the church say some very obvious things to the uninitiated; but it is only to the person who has learned its language that the church speaks fluently. . . Every Christian should train his ear to hear them, (the voices of the churches), and should learn the church's language of symbolism. There is, or should be, nothing in a church which has not meaning and which does not glorify God or aid in lifting the worshipper into communion with him. The more profoundly one appreciates the significance of the church and its furnishings, the greater will be the reverence for it, and the more truly will it become for him God's house of prayer."<sup>1</sup>

The difficulty presented is that the Protestant Church has not definitely decided what is Romanism and what is not. Ritual is used to a great extent, such as, baptism and communion; songs written by Catholic men are sung, therefore, is it any more unreasonable to employ symbolism in the worship of the church to enrich the Christian experience? It is admitted that there are dangers in the use of symbols, but this is only when they are not understood, showing them to stand for an idea and nothing more, and when they are used incorrectly. These dangers

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1. R. Pierce Beaver: The House of God, pp. 11 and 14.

must be kept in mind, but the great value of symbols far outweighs their danger.

"Every religious truth has greater meaning than that expressed in words. Religion points toward the universal truth. Words often handicap rather than increase thought. A symbol indicates and points toward greater truth, leaving the mind free to pursue its course. Every excellency has its danger, so a symbol must be used as a symbol, as a sign and a stimulus to the thought and imagination but not as a fetish; neither should symbols or ornaments be misplaced or used inappropriately."<sup>1</sup>

In our complex world, symbols are becoming alive and are an integral part of our every day lives.

"None of us is entirely free from symbolism. Psychologically, symbolism functions in the associative process. Symbols, no matter how elemental, often recall and associate vague and distant values, give them form and great emotional significance. One elemental symbol can make us feel and visualize a movement, procession, philosophy, experience, love, passion, hate, and disgust."<sup>2</sup>

As has been shown before, the Egyptians taught their religion entirely by the use of symbols, as did the Greeks. In the great Church of Saint Mark's in Venice the whole Bible is laid bare by the use of symbols and pictures. These stories were made plain to the people so they could read them at a glance. This way even the most illiterate man knew his Bible. Today, many well-educated men do not know their Bibles. It is natural for man to use symbols. Science uses them to make things clear and also for their economic value. Think of the time and energy wasted by the chemist if he would have to stop to write out the word "hydrochloric acid" every time he wanted it. Compare this with the simple HCl, a symbol meaning the same thing. As science draws upon these symbols for its language because of their value, so religion can make use of them.

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1. Elbert Conover: Building the House of God, p. 159.
2. Louis Cheskin: Living with Art, p. 132.

### B. Symbolism of Church

The symbols to be studied here are those common to nearly all churches and not peculiar to any one church. The church building itself is one symbol made up of many little symbols. The corner stone is symbolic of our Lord Jesus Christ. The church for a good, firm foundation must be built upon Him. This corner stone often bears the monogram of Christ and has placed in it the Holy Bible and at times important papers of the church. Isaiah tells the kind of stone that this corner stone is: ". . . a foundation of stone, a tried stone, a precious corner-stone of sure foundation." Jesus Christ can be the only sure foundation of any church or life and reminds one of His own words about the man building his house upon the rock. New York can have its great towering structures only because it is undergirded with solid rock or stone. So, only when a life is built solidly upon the Rock can it tower to mighty heights of achievement for God. Placed upon the foundation of stone is the floor, or pavement, of faith. This pavement of faith, built soundly upon the foundation, rests securely upon the rock or stone. Only as the foundation and the floor are solid, can the rest of the building be secure. In the Christian life, Jesus is the foundation and faith must follow immediately. These two go together, and without them both, there can be nothing built that will endure the test of time. In the great Gothic walls, the deep-set windows symbolize the eyes of the soul letting in the light of God. In the medieval ages the walls of the churches were massive blocks of stone with small

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1. Cf. Isaiah 28:16: "Therefore thus saith the Lord Jehovah, 'Behold I lay in Zion for a foundation a stone, a tried stone, a precious corner stone of sure foundation: he that believeth shall not be in haste.'"

windows that let little light into the interior. These gradually gave way to less massive walls and larger windows were added. Today our churches are filled with beautiful stained glass windows and the church proper is filled with God's command, "Let there be light."<sup>1</sup> The pointed roof, symbolic of hands in prayer, denotes charity for it covers a multitude of sins. As Christ was the foundation, so He is the roof, for it is through His atoning, covering work that we may enter the Church and be covered from our sins. The spire lifts the soul up to God. All lines lead up and culminate in it and it seems to pierce heaven itself. A single spire speaks the message of One true God while a church with two spires witnesses to the divine and human natures of Christ. As first used, the tower was a look-out for protection, now it symbolizes a God who is our Strong Tower and Everlasting Refuge. The crowning feature is the Cross which, as a symbol of sacrifice, lifts the soul and rebukes unworthy thoughts of God and gives the desire to attain to new spiritual heights. Many churches still have bells in their towers. In the early morning these bells ring out and symbolize the call to prayer and the Voice of God calling His children. In the olden days, the bell played a much more important part than it does now, and the people christened them with oil in a special dedication service. Wherever the bells are heard now they call men to remembrance of God and prayer, and also ring out His praises. The doors in the main façade open out signifying the open heart of Christ to accept one into His fellowship and also that this is the only way into the fellowship of the Church of God. The narthex, known also as the vestibule, used today only

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1. The Holy Bible: Genesis 1:14.

for those who have come in late, stood for those that were outside the communion of the Church, the catechumen. Here the unbaptized stood and heard the service. They were not allowed within the Church of Jesus Christ until they had given their lives to Him and could partake of the "bread of heaven." When this was done they could enter the Church properly and become a regular member. How much meaning could and would be added if church people knew the real significance of the narthex. The symbolism of numbers plays an important part here, too. Three doors lead from the narthex into the main sanctuary showing the church to be trinitarian: Father, Son, and Holy Spirit. Following this are three aisles, denoting the same idea. Where there is a divided apsidal end, the pulpit on one side and the lectern on the other, the reredos is in three distinct parts. Three steps, the Trinity, then four steps--symbol of the evangelists, lead up to the altar, indicating again the thought of the Trinity with the number four added making seven, the perfect or complete number.

The interior of the church is divided into two sections, the Church militant and the Church triumphant. The symbolism here is very clear. The militant Church, the Church still in conflict, extends up to the apsidal end and signifies the Church fighting her battle against evil. The people are her warriors and soldiers of the Cross. In the early church often the walls were uneven, representing the idea of struggle and being pressed upon from the outside. Also this part of the church was called a ship, its Latin meaning being navis, which later came into use as our word, nave. Fellowship with Christ is displayed here, and He gathers these, His children, from the storms of the battle of life. At the end of the militant Church is the Church triumphant representing the Church at rest, or those who have gone to be

with the Lord. This is the part of God's Church which is reached through death. Here the most holy of all rites is performed, the Eucharist. All attention is centered around the altar or communion table and the whole beauty and dignity of the church radiates from this symbolism of heaven. The militant church is the training and battle ground, but this is the victory, Paradise. So, too, as the first is the church of war, the second signifies peace. Through the sacrifice of Jesus Christ, reconciliation has been made with God.

"And so at the close of the Holy Eucharist celebrated in the sanctuary, after the 'memorial' has been made to God which his Son 'hath commanded us to make,' and we have been 'partakers of His most blessed Body and Blood,' this is the blessing which carries the thought up to what, in its fullness, waits for us in heaven: 'The Peace of God, which passes all understanding, keep your hearts in the knowledge of God, and of His Son, Jesus Christ our Lord.'

"The oblation, the communion, the peace, of the sanctuary, these all tell us thus of heaven and the 'Church Triumphant.'

"Of Christ's 'mystical body,' with its fellowship and cross-bearing on earth, its passage through death to the joy of Paradise, and, waiting beyond, heaven, with its communion and peace through the Cross--it is of this that the church as a building may speak to devout hearts."<sup>1</sup>

Regardless of the form, sprinkling or immersion, baptism is one of the cardinal doctrines of the Christian Church. The baptismal font, octagonal in form, symbolizes regeneration. This came from the idea that seven periods of time were required to complete creation with one more added for the new creation. It is also the number of regeneration, as being made up of "five," the wounds of Christ, and "three," the Trinity. The early church placed the font near the main door indicating that baptism, the outward sign of an inner change, was the only admission into the fellowship of the church. The font is an

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1. J. A. Regester: The Worship of the Church and the Beauty of Holiness, p. 36.



invitation to those outside the church and a constant reminder to the baptized that they are children of God and should walk worthy of their high calling in Christ. Water, symbol of purity, represents the complete washing away of sin and a new creature washed "whiter than snow" steps forth. The pulpit carries with it a two-fold lesson. First to the minister, for he is to preach the Word of God; second, to those who hear, for they are to take this Word into their lives and live by it daily.

Most Christian churches have the Christian flag on display, whether in the main sanctuary or not, but somewhere in the church building. This emblem originated in 1897 by the superintendent of the Sunday School at Coney Island, is highly symbolic. A white background, symbol of purity and peace, has placed in it in the upper corner a red cross, denoting the sacrifice of the Savior, on a deep sky-blue signifying fidelity and truth. This flag has gone all over the world and wherever it is seen, Christ is raised high. As a flag is a symbol of one's loyalty to a specific country, so the Christian flag tells of the church universal and the greater loyalty due to Jesus Christ.

### C. The Cross

The Cross is by far the most widely used and best known of the Christian symbols. Even before the visible Cross was made, men would make the sign of the cross on their foreheads. The Cross has not always been associated with the Lord Jesus Christ; in fact, its history goes back to the most ancient of times. The first symbol for

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1. World Outlook, July 1942.

good luck, made by the intersection of two straight lines, became the symbol of fire. This form later developed into the modern swastika, also meaning a good omen. Crosses with arms of equal length, made by the North American Indians, symbolized the four winds. The Chinese cross, a Greek cross or equilateral, was placed within a square. The earliest of all crosses was that of the Egyptian ankh, later known as the Tau Cross. This form has been called the Old Testament Cross for it was used among the Jews. The Greek cross, the most simple of all designs, had an upright line bisected by a horizontal line making it equilateral. Another form of the cross was that used by the Romans like a Greek cross with a long piece extending below the cross arms. This later became known as the Latin cross. Through the evolution of these three crosses, the Tau, Greek, and Latin, the Christian Cross was born. The Christian Cross in all ages, since the death and resurrection of Jesus Christ, has been filled with meaning for men of all nations and colors and creeds. It is the symbol of vicarious sacrifice and atonement. Symbolized, also, is life eternal, resurrection through faith, and the thought of redemption in Jesus Christ. The Latin cross, the type upon which the Savior gave His life, is the one generally accepted by Christendom as its cross. Today, man does not think of the cruelty of the death of the cross, but when its head is lifted up, it becomes the glorious symbol of Christ's love and sacrifice for all mankind.

#### D. Conclusion

The church, in city or country, large or small, is built upon symbols. Each has its part and a very important meaning attached to it. There are meanings there, why not teach them to our children?

The church will become a building with a special message for each individual if this is done, but these symbols must be taught with understanding. This great Christian heritage of symbolism has been set out for later generations. The church must go forth to claim her inheritance.

CHAPTER V  
GENERAL SUMMARY AND CONCLUSION

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Symbolism stands an open field waiting to be rediscovered. Its history is long and varied, but the field of Christian art is among the richest. Symbols in the lives of all mankind, Egyptian, Babylonian, Greek, Roman, Jew, and early Christian, have inspired men to attain new heights. They have lifted men out of themselves to higher ideals. They have conveyed ideas to the unlearned and hidden things to the uninitiated. They have won for themselves a place in the thinking and teaching of modern civilization. Because one does not understand and appreciate symbols is no cause to throw them out completely. Some persons may not like to listen to the great music of the masters, but it does not harm the music. Symbols have a great value and use should be made of them in their proper place.

The conclusion is this: since Christian symbolism can play such an important part in the education of the individual, the Christian church should make full use of her great opportunity. Who of us when seeing the cross does not think of our Lord and Savior, Jesus Christ, and of His great atoning work for us? It is a constant reminder of His life and how we, as Christians, must live as belonging to Him. Symbols also teach intangible ideas. Think of teaching faith, hope, love without some concrete aid. It is impossible. To the mind, especially of the child, these must show themselves in concrete form. The economic value of symbols is important also. Ideas which may take a great deal of time to express are conveyed at a glance through the use of a symbol. It is also more impressive, for the eye

takes in a great deal more than the ear. Symbols, in all their beauty, lend an appropriate setting to worship and reflection. In this same regard, they become an aid to concentration and give the desire to action. Thus, they reveal hidden Scriptural meaning, appealing through the emotions to the understanding and volition. The most important sanction for the use of symbols is because our Lord made use of them Himself. He was first introduced by John in the words, "Behold the Lamb of God . ." <sup>1</sup> In the words of Jesus Himself, "I am the bread of life." <sup>2</sup> "I am the living bread which came down out of heaven: if any man eat of this bread, he shall live forever; yea, and the bread which I will give is my flesh, for the life of the world." <sup>3</sup> "He that eateth me . ." <sup>4</sup> "I am the light of the world." <sup>5</sup> "I am the door of the sheep." <sup>6</sup> "I am the good shepherd." <sup>7</sup> "I am the way, the truth, and the life." <sup>8</sup> "I am the true vine and my Father is the husbandman." <sup>9</sup>

Our Lord made great use of symbols and they formed an important part of His teaching. We, as Christian educators, cannot do less!

1. John 1:29
2. John 6:48
3. John 6:51
4. John 6:57
5. John 8:12
6. John 10:7
7. John 10:11
8. John 14:6
9. John 15:1

CHAPTER VI

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