

CHAPTER 5

Songs, Sacrament, and Symbols

Those who sing pray twice.

Augustine of Hippo

Songs, sacraments, and symbols are united by more than the fact that they all begin with the same letter. They are the three most common forms of non-verbal communication in most services of Christian worship. We will explore each in turn, showing how they are all central to worship and largely right brained in orientation.

MUSIC IN WORSHIP

In the last chapter we spoke of the ways various forms of verbalization add levels of meaning that go beyond the words themselves. Now, if we take those super-charged words we call a poem, or even prose fitly spoken, and set them to beautiful or at least appropriate music, we are elevated to even higher levels of non-verbal communication. Now even more information is being profoundly expressed that words, even poetic words, literally cannot say.

Many years ago a woman came up to me after a Sunday Communion worship service. I could tell by the intent look in her eyes that she had something very serious to say. “Bob, that organ music you played during communion today ... it was ... it was ... well, it was like a second sermon! Thank you. Thank you!” Her struggle for words was understandable and exactly to the point. She was trying to use words to describe something for which there were no words. I knew better than to ask her what that second sermon was about.

Music has historically been honored in Christian worship for its ability to interpret and add levels of meaning to words. But if all we have been saying about non-verbal communication is valid, then the music itself, apart from any words, can stand as a God-ordained vehicle of communication. Then a piece of music that has no connection to any words whatsoever might still be God's vehicle for dialogue with us. I am proposing that God created music from the beginning as not merely a form of entertainment but as a means for communication – a different sort of communication from verbal speech and supplementary to it. For all Augustine's worry about how music sometimes distracted him from the meaning of the words, he still seems to have had some understanding of music as separate form of communication. His much-quoted phrase, "Those who sing pray twice," reveals his grasp of music as a powerful and useful language quite distinct from words. Yet, this line of thinking is exceedingly rare among Christian thinkers. Jerome goes so far as to counsel a mother that her daughter "be deaf to the sound of the organ, and not know even the uses of the pipe, the lyre, and the cithara."¹

The twentieth-century German theologian Dietrich Bonhoeffer shares this perception:

All devotion, all attention should be concentrated upon the Word in the hymn....

[W]e do not hum a melody; we sing words of praise to God, words of thanksgiving, confession and prayer. Thus the music is completely the servant of the Word.²

As we shall see in the following chapter, the Puritan tradition vigorously adopted this line of thinking. The following quote is typical:

Cautions are necessary with respect to Musick and Painting; the fancy is often too quick in them, and the Soul too much affected by the Senses.... Should Christians squander away so many precious Hours in Vanity, or take Pleasure in gratifying a

Sense that has so often been a Traitor to Virtue? ³

One catches in all these quotes a sort of love-hate relationship with music. Its beauty and benefits cannot be denied, yet we find throughout history this sense of caution about those very beauties and benefits – a skepticism that seems to say, “Anything that good has got to be bad for you.”

But in its best moments the Church of Jesus Christ has known that such asceticism, such opposition to some of God’s best gifts, has no true home in the Christian tradition. On this fallen planet, where there is a gift of God, there is a perversion and misuse of it as well. To run away from God’s good gifts because they are often misused is at best an abdication of our responsibilities to be good stewards of all God gave us and, at worst, a blasphemy against the God who gave those gifts. Christians are not called to surrender to the world’s perversions, but to join Christ in acts of redemption of a twisted and broken world. Fully aware of our own potential, even our predilection to such distortion, we are still called to be examples of a fuller, richer, redeemed humanity. The church should exhibit the fullest possible manifestation of what a redeemed person and world might look like.

Steven Guthrie, Professor of Theology at St. Andrews University, Scotland, observes that the apostle Paul’s attitude about music is different from the authors cited above. Basing his argument on Paul’s Letter to the Ephesians, he interprets Paul’s injunction that Christians are to “speak to one another with psalms, hymns, and spiritual songs” (5:19) as a charge for Christians to come out of the darkness of their old lives and live as children of the light. Guthrie writes:

To a Christian community surrounded by ignorance and immorality; to a people who were themselves prone to the blindness and indulgence of their former way of life; at the conclusion of a passage warning against irrationality and sins of the flesh—Paul urges singing and music making.

The contrast with the first passages we considered [quotes from Augustine, Calvin, Athanasius, and Bonhoeffer, some of which are cited above] could not be more stark. Paul shares the same broad concerns as Augustine and Calvin, but the recommendation emerging from those concerns is entirely different. To put it very crudely, Augustine says: “Irrationality is bad. Sensuality is bad. Therefore, be careful about music.” Paul on the other hand says, “Foolishness is bad. Sensuality is bad. Therefore, you had better sing.”⁴

Why did God create music and the other arts? It was not just for our enjoyment, not just for our recreation, though even if this were the case, it would be reason enough for their full incorporation in Christian life and worship. But they also were created because in God’s grand scheme of things, there are all manner of things God has to say that words cannot say. That was his plan before the foundation of the world. That is why he designed our brains as he did. And when God saw all that he had made, behold, it was very good.

But music and the other arts are not good at everything. These right-brained ways of communicating are essential, but they are not the sorts of mental processes that can provide a clear line of logical thought. For that we need the left brain. And I emphasize the word *need*. For while the right brain feeds the world of imagination and aesthetics, the left brain is the domain of facts, figures, and reason. It is the guardian of propositional truth, whether theological, scientific, or rational in general. How can we be sure that the essential but murky right-brain is sending messages that are good and true? Our left brain cross-references them in light of the clear, hard rigors of logic and rationality. The fact that God has much to say that transcends the world of words is not to diminish the absolute necessity of words. The Bible may not be the only way God

speaks, but it is the Word of God in the most concrete form we have. And the Church has traditionally affirmed that it is the duty and delight of all Christians to conform their lives to the Word of God as fully as possible. If we may be guilty of short-changing God's intentions by limiting right-brained elements in worship and life, and many of us are, there is far greater danger if we short-change the left-brained elements. The Reformers were dead right about that. There is far greater danger in short-changing left brain elements because God's attributes and will for us are made known to us primarily in rational discourse. If you really want to know *details* about your redemption, the Holy Spirit, or the life to come, studying Calvin's *Institutes* or Luther's *Augsburg Confession* will get you further than listening to Bach's *Jesu, Joy of Man's Desiring* or meditating on Michelangelo's *The Creation* in the Sistine Chapel. The whole point of this book, after all, is to show that certain parts of the brain are better than others at certain tasks. Music can sometimes do what words cannot; words can sometimes do what music cannot. It's all about balance.

THE SACRAMENTS

Just as music engages the right hemisphere of the average worshiper, so does the symbolism of the Sacraments. It was Augustine of Hippo who crystallized the definition of sacraments when he said that they are "a visible sign of an invisible grace."⁵ A sign is something that points to something else, and sacraments certainly do that. The bread points to Christ's body, the wine to his blood. But Sacraments are also symbols, which is a slightly different matter. Symbols do more than merely point to something else; they *represent* the object to which they refer. They represent by some sort of resemblance.⁶ Red wine resembles blood. Bread can be torn and broken, just like the body of Christ was. Jesus' words, "This is my body, this is my blood," lie at

the heart of the meaning of the Eucharist. Christians differ as to whether these words are merely symbolic or more than symbolic, but all agree they are *at least* symbolic. For many Christians “this is my body” is metaphoric language, where one thing is said to be another thing, as in Luther’s famous hymn, “A Mighty Fortress Is Our God.” Jesus’ metaphoric words invite us to imagine the ways the bread might symbolize his body. Bread can be broken, it nourishes those who take it in, and it must “come through the fire.” As the individual grains of wheat are crushed and broken in order to become one loaf, so the individual Christian is called to die to self to become part of the one Body of Christ. As the sacraments embody this sort of symbolism and creative imagination, they stimulate the right side of the brain. And they are remarkably efficient! One who has come to understand the various meanings of a symbol can grasp in an instant what would take hours to fully propound with words.

For Christians who hold that there is more than mere symbolism occurring at the Eucharistic meal, there is even further right brain stimulation. The various Eucharistic theologies of real presence, consubstantiation, and transubstantiation all further engage our imaginations as we seek understanding of these mysteries.

And so we see some ways that symbols can speak. In many Christian traditions, not just the sermon, but the sacraments as well are considered to be a proclamation of the Word. R. J. Gore, Jr., Professor of Systematic Theology at Erskine Theological seminary, writes, “Calvin viewed the Word as more extensive than the sermon. Indeed, borrowing from Augustine, he spoke of the Lord’s Supper as a ‘visible word.’ Thus, in understanding Calvin’s thinking, it is a grave error to replace the primacy of the Word with the primacy of preaching.”⁷ Gore means for us to see that Calvin’s emphasis on the primacy of the Word in worship includes the sacraments. They too, and not just the sermon, are a proclamation of the Word. As Calvin himself states,

“For, that the Word may not beat your ears in vain, and that the sacraments may not strike your eyes [we might add, your nose, taste, and touch] in vain, the Spirit shows us that in them *it is God speaking to us.*”⁸ (italics mine).

“Word and Sacrament” is a phrase much used to summarize the chief functions of the clergy during a service of worship. They preach the Word and administer the sacraments. Once again we see the marvelous balance between right and left brain functions. But again we must be careful not to over-simplify the distinction. Preaching can appeal to the right brain through the use of symbolism or various illustrations. But it is a verbal enterprise by definition and therefore largely left brained. In the same way the sacraments focus on right-brain symbolism and visualization. Yet no sacrament can be rightly administered without the use of words.

There are, actually, too few words in most Protestant Communion celebrations. A study of the suggested Communion liturgies provided by most mainline denominations reveals a much lengthier prayer prior to distribution than many pastors tend to use. This Prayer of Thanksgiving is based on ancient models. Communion is often called Eucharist, which simply means, thanksgiving. When this great Trinitarian prayer is eliminated or truncated, as is so often the case, we severely limit the congregation’s opportunity to perform one of the central functions of the sacrament—to remember all that God has done in the past, in Jesus Christ, and the sure promise to bring in the Kingdom in all its fullness—to remember all this and *give thanks!* It is as if we want to get through all this as quickly as we can. After all, the service must be over in an hour! Right brained symbols can speak eloquently. But in order for them to speak efficiently and truthfully, they need to be properly understood. The Eucharist is central to Christian worship but many people are not sure what they are to focus their minds upon during the sacrament. Many thoughts are appropriate for Communion, but not just any thoughts. The full Eucharistic prayer is

an instance where a bit more left brained verbal guidance can truly help the right brain apprehend the symbolism in more depth and keep it theologically sound. What marvelous cooperation between the hemispheres is afforded in this sacrament!

Sign Value

Another issue related to the way Communion is celebrated is what James White, Professor of Liturgical Studies at Drew University, calls sign value—how well do the objects and actions of our celebration signify the true meaning of the sacrament?⁹ The waters of baptism speak of the complete cleansing from all our sin, our plunging into the death of Christ and our being raised into newness of life, and the massive waters of Noah's flood.¹⁰ A slight moistening of one's forehead with one dab of water can never portray all of that. A minister should at least take a good handful of water so that all present can not only see but hear the water. And I wonder why many congregations so often settle for a single application of water when the earliest records we have instruct three applications of water as the Trinitarian formula is pronounced.¹¹ It is as if we are ashamed of the waters of Baptism. Often the sign value of our sacraments as we practice them is actually counter-productive in that it reinforces a different message from or sacramental theologies. Further, I have heard ministers give extended commentary during a sacrament that had the effect of a second sermon. Here again the sign value can easily get lost in the sea of verbiage, especially if the symbolism is being underplayed. (The issue is not the words per se, but the relative importance of words to the sacred actions and elements.)

Sign value is an issue with the sacrament of Holy Communion as well. If Christ's body is represented as one loaf in Scripture, and the breaking of that loaf as our participation in the broken body of Christ, and if that one loaf also speaks of how we who are many are made one

body as we partake of the one loaf,¹² would not the best sign value be to use one loaf of bread in our communion services? Why do so many Christian congregations disregard the importance of Paul's teaching by down-playing the loaf and emphasizing tiny individual wafers or bread cubes? The symbolism of these individual servings of bread seems to run exactly counter to Paul's teaching in 1 Corinthians. It seem counter-productive to promulgate a symbol that seems to teach individualism rather than oneness with Christ and his church. The sign value is inappropriate not just because of the loss of the one loaf, but because the servings tend to be miniscule. These miniature servings do not communicate the massiveness of God's love and grace as seen in the life, death, and resurrection of Jesus Christ.

Another issue about the Lord's Supper that is related to sign value has to do with frequency of celebration. How often should a congregation celebrate the Eucharist? Most churches agree that the older tradition of quarterly celebrations was too infrequent. Annual informal surveys that I do in my seminary worship classes show that across a wide variety of denominations, the majority of churches have drastically increased the frequency of the sacrament from the earlier quarterly practice. That is a move in the right direction. But increasingly, as I study the Scriptures on this subject, I am convinced that there is direct Biblical evidence in support of weekly (if not daily) celebrations of the Eucharist. We know that during the years the New Testament was written, the embryonic Christian community had already decided to establish the first day of the week (Sunday) rather than the Sabbath (Saturday) as their main meeting day,¹³ and that this became known as "The Lord's Day."¹⁴ We read in Acts 20:7, "On the first day of the week we came together to break bread." This verse bears witness to two things—the meeting day was Sunday, and the reason for the meeting was "to break bread." There are twelve usages of the term "break bread" in the New Testament.¹⁵ Five of these

references are accounts of the Last Supper. Actually, there are seven references if one includes the Luke 24 Emmaus account, which I and others view as a teaching about Eucharistic gatherings.

Further, we have a curious repetition of ideas about meals in Acts 2. This passage, which also contains the Pentecost account, is the primal account of life in the Christian community. We are told in verse 42 that the Christians devoted themselves to four things—the apostles’ teaching, the fellowship, the breaking of bread, and prayer. What is meant by “the breaking of bread?” Is this a reference merely to eating meals together or a direct reference to the Lord’s Supper? Then in verse 46, we are told again that “They broke bread in their homes” but this time Luke adds, “and [they] ate together with glad and sincere hearts. . . .” What is meant by this repetition of breaking bread together and eating together? Is there a difference between breaking bread and eating together? We cannot know for sure. If it were an example of Hebrew poetry, we might say this is merely a case of poetic parallelism. But this is clearly not a poetic passage. Is Paul just outlining the events of a meal, saying in effect, “You have to break the bread before you can eat it”? It could be, but it seems unlike Paul to make such a trivial observation. The most logical interpretation would seem to be that Paul was describing two events—a communal meal similar to our covered-dish dinners, and The Lord’s Supper.

There is much evidence that the New Testament church’s Communion celebrations took place within the context of a full meal called an Agape Feast. At a given point in the meal, the leader would call for the group’s attention, deliver a sermon/address, and distribute the bread and cup.¹⁶ It would appear that this is the custom referred to by Paul in 1 Corinthians 11:

In the following directives I have no praise for you, for your meetings do more harm than good. In the first place, I hear that when you come together as a church, there are

divisions among you, and to some extent I believe it. No doubt there have to be differences among you to show which of you have God's approval. When you come together, it is not the Lord's Supper you eat, for as you eat, each of you goes ahead without waiting for anybody else. One remains hungry, another gets drunk. Don't you have homes to eat and drink in? Or do you despise the church of God and humiliate those who have nothing? What shall I say to you? Shall I praise you for this? Certainly not!

(vv. 17–22)

How could one get drunk simply by passing the Communion cup around? There appears to be a whole lot more eating here too than a Eucharist would entail. Some remain hungry, because others are eating without waiting for everyone to arrive. This simply does not sound like a mere Communion celebration. It is, in fact, what the early church called an Agape Meal, a Love Feast. It seems Paul was not keen on the idea of these meals from the start. "Don't you have homes to eat and drink in?" he scolds! I do not think this means Paul was against church dinners, but he seems to oppose including a Eucharistic celebration as part of them. It is also important to note that Paul's language suggests that *each* of their "meetings" (11:17 and 20) includes the Eucharist.

We also have the witness of the Didache, the earliest post-New Testament document that gives instruction about Christian worship. In chapter fourteen we read, "But every Lord's day gather yourselves together, and break bread, and give thanksgiving...."¹⁷ This document, dating from about the year A.D. 100, gives clear evidence of the Eucharistic character of the Lord's Day assemblies in that time and place. Then the First Apology of Justin Martyr, written in Rome in about A.D. 150, in a chapter titled "The Weekly Meetings of the Christians," states that these

meetings consisted of readings of the Apostles and Prophets, instruction by the president, prayers, and a distribution of the bread and wine to each.¹⁸

Because of all this evidence, I can only assume that the New Testament Church met together frequently, perhaps every day,¹⁹ for the express purpose of breaking bread, that is, celebrating the Lord's Supper. If this analysis is correct, it is most interesting to consider that the New Testament gives no such extensive endorsement for preaching at every gathering. Of course, Scripture calls us to include preaching in worship as well (Gal. 1:8; II Tim. 4:2) But in the light of the above evidence, it is curious that Protestantism has insisted on weekly sermons—and lengthy ones at that—while the sacrament has often been relegated to a mere four times a year—or less. The New Testament seems simply to assume that if Christians met to worship, they celebrated the Lord's Supper.

It was the expressed desire of Luther, Calvin, Knox, many of the Puritans, as well as Wesley that the Lord's Supper be celebrated as frequently as possible. Calvin vainly pled with the church authorities for weekly Communion. Wesley said he would take the Eucharist every day if he could. Knox and many of the Puritans also favored very frequent communions. At least two things hindered Puritan efforts. First, the lack of ordained ministers made anything like regular celebrations impossible. But even where ministers were available, the reformers were often unsuccessful in convincing the people to attend regular communion services. After a lifetime of experience with a single Communion celebration a year, usually at Easter, it was difficult to re-program the thinking of the hard-headed Scots to accept truly frequent celebrations. Over time, the less frequent scheduling of the sacrament became institutionalized and sadly, in many places, canonized. It is a great mystery to me how and why the infrequent celebration of the Lord's Supper has been allowed to go on for so long when the teaching of

Scripture seems so clear on the subject. Fortunately, the well-established trend now is to reverse this long neglected state of affairs. Yet, though many main-line denominations recommend weekly Communion, most congregations are still far from the weekly celebrations of the New Testament church. We seem to insist upon spiritually starving ourselves.

This study of the centrality of the sacraments to Christian worship emphasizes once again the inherent right/left brain balance Biblical worship provides, or can provide when the full diet of Word and Sacrament is present at each gathering of the faithful. I have gone to considerable lengths about the Sacraments because I believe Scripture calls for weekly celebrations and because they offer us one of the best ways to achieve better balance in worship. If churches offer them every month at the very least, and if they are celebrated with due consideration for proper sign value, the Word of God can be proclaimed with the richness and power God intends.

Sacramental Worship

The sacraments are liturgical acts that at the very least convey special meaning. But there are many other liturgical acts that also convey meaning. They are not sacraments, but they are sacramental. Robert Webber, Professor of Worship at Northern Seminary, in his book *Evangelicals on the Canterbury Trail: Why Evangelicals Are Attracted to the Liturgical Church*, provides a disarming account of his personal faith journey from fundamentalism through a circuitous route to the Anglican Church. Much of the attraction of Anglicanism for him was related to the sacramental nature of this worship tradition. Sacramental worship is characterized first by worship that places much emphasis on the sacraments. But beyond using simply water, wine, and bread, *sacramental acts* would include in addition to the Sacraments other visible and tangible signs and acts through which one's "relationship with God in faith is established,

repaired, and maintained.”²⁰ Among these might be anointing with oil, foot washing, the laying on of hands, application of ashes on Ash Wednesday, and other symbolic acts.

While Webber was drawn into such worship by a powerful longing to know Jesus more deeply, he found some compelling theological reasons to support his move:

First, I’ve become sacramental because of the incarnation. I’ve always believed God became human. But not until ten years ago did I begin to wrestle with the implication of the incarnation. The incarnation affirmed that God became one of us. . . . The point, of course, is that God became present to his world not in a spiritual, bodiless, timeless, spaceless way. Rather, he became human in flesh and blood, in time, space, and history. The incarnation affirms that God acted through material creation to give us his salvation. Here then is the sacramental principle! God uses his created order as a vehicle of his saving, comforting, and healing presence.²¹

After expressing how his discovery of the early church fathers such as Cyprian, Augustine, Ambrose, Athanasius, and St. John Chrysostom enriched his life, he continues his discussion of sacramentality:

I was surprised to discover that these fathers thought in terms of one sacrament—one visible, tangible means by which we are brought to God. That means is Jesus Christ. He is *the sacrament par excellence*. The fathers never argued for salvation by the sacraments. Rather, the sacraments of water and bread and wine, they said, are the visible, tangible signs of Christ’s saving action. The purpose of the sacrament is to signify Christ and thus provide a sign of his encounter with us.

Consequently, the fathers saw many things as sacramental. They

recognized many means by which Christ's saving reality was signified. Tertullian, for example, went back to the Old Testament and saw sacramental signs everywhere: the Exodus is sacramental because it points to the Christ event; the offices of prophet, priest, and king are sacramental because they are fulfilled in Christ.... Even the Tabernacle and the Temple, with all their sacrifices and sacred rituals, were seen as sacramental. What is important here is that all these visible, tangible, and concrete realities were shadows of what was to come. They looked to Jesus, the person whose reality they signified.

When the early fathers evaluated the New Testament church . . . they spoke not only of Baptism and the Lord's Supper as visible means by which we are brought to Christ, but also of the Gospels, prayer, the study of doctrine, and the power of a life led as a good example.

... I discovered that this sacramental sense is not as far removed from my Evangelical background as it first appeared. I had always believed the Scriptures somehow mysteriously represented the means through which God became present to the reader. All I had to do was extend this principle to all of life and to specific signs of God's acting in the church.²²

A heightened awareness of these sacramental aspects of worship with all their symbolism, visual, and even tactile qualities cannot help but engage the worshiping brain more fully. It remains for us now to explore the nature and power of symbolism itself in worship.

SYMBOLISM

Symbolism is important to God and therefore should be taken very seriously by us as well. Symbols are powerful indeed in our worship as in our everyday lives. For those with a “the simpler, the better” mindset about worship, the mere discussion of symbolism, let alone any manifestation of it, can be disturbing. I have observed this sense of distress from some in my worship classes as well as in various church committees as a suggestion about including some symbolic act or object was being discussed. Sometimes the concern is to avoid anything that might be considered “high church.” I can still hear one of my older seminary student’s immediate reaction, “But I thought we [Protestants] were trying to get away from all that pomp.” I have heard other ready objections for fear the proposed addition might distract from worship or even encourage superstition! Yet one cannot avoid symbolism. Even the most simply designed worship room will feature multiple layers of symbolism. There may not be any stained glass, banners, paraments, candles, or even flowers, the minister and choirs may just be wearing regular street clothes, but still there will be symbolism all around. The arrangement of the chairs or pews will be a symbol of the role the congregation is given in worship. If set in parallel rows facing straight forward, they will symbolize the belief that the congregation is to focus its attention on what is happening up front. If the seating is designed with a gentle curve, this will speak of a desire for the congregation to better see each other, symbolizing the importance of the relationships among members of the congregation. If the chairs are set up so that the people face each other across a central aisle, the message of the importance of congregational community will be all the stronger. A business suit is as symbolic in its own way as a gown, perhaps symbolizing that the pastor is one with the congregation. For that matter, even if worship leaders wear blue jeans and a T shirt, they are still engaging in high symbolism. Whatever clothing one wears, the style is associated with a particular segment of society. And a decision *not* to wear a

liturgical robe may be seen as a decision not to separate one's self from the congregation, not to appear too haughty, or even be seen as a sort of rebellion against authority.

What catches your eye upon entry into a worship room? Do you first notice a high central pulpit, symbolizing the centrality of the preached word? Do you first notice a large communion table given central place—a symbol of the pre-eminence of the Eucharist? Perhaps you notice that pulpit, font, and table are placed such that all three receive equal status, thus symbolizing the equal status of Word and Sacrament. Whenever a worship space is built, someone has to make a decision about where to place these basic furnishings. And that chosen arrangement will thereafter stand as a living symbol of a theology of worship.

In many if not most church-building programs I have observed, an architect is engaged for the project and perhaps some basic conversations take place about how to build the sanctuary. But because of limited congregational funds or their lack of knowledge about worship matters or both, architects are often pretty much left to their own devices. Consequently, the architect simply designs a basic church, one that looks like so many other churches. I've seen this design over and over all over the country in Methodist, Baptist, Independent, Presbyterian, and Pentecostal churches—fixed pews in even rows face straight forward, one central pulpit on a platform with the choir behind facing the congregation. A small table is placed directly in front of the pulpit. That's about it. Thus is lost a once-in-a-lifetime chance to really consider what worship is and what design might best facilitate that understanding. Yet, even when no one has currently given these matters much thought, someone in the past did. The architectural design is just one of many designs used throughout history. Such things do not just “happen.” When most church designs were first conceived, they were in reaction to some previous design and changed for a particular reason. Meaning and purpose stood behind those decisions.

Beyond these issues of basic room design, symbolism can be seen in the furnishings used as well. As one looks around even a bare-bones worship space, one will probably note that somewhere, on the pulpit, communion table, or perhaps on a pew or on a door, a cross or other sacred design will have been etched, painted, or otherwise affixed. It is the rare church, indeed, that has no cross displayed anywhere. The very arrangement of the seats or perhaps the aisles is so often in a cruciform design.

One cannot avoid symbolism, nor would we want to. Not just our buildings, but our human relationships are permeated with symbolic acts. Every time we shake hands, open the door for someone else, offer a hug, salute the flag (or burn it), stand up during a worship service, or blow out our birthday candles, we enact a little ceremony—a ritual—that has symbolic meaning.

A recent controversy in South Carolina gives stark testimonial to the profound power of symbols in our everyday lives. The Confederate battle flag had been flying, until July of 2000, on top of the South Carolina State House in Columbia. For many, it was a symbol of Southern heritage and a way of honoring the many South Carolinians who died in the War Between the States. For other South Carolinians it was a hated sign of racial oppression that had no business being flown on a government building in this day and age. The two sides argued past each other for years. Tensions mounted. Demonstrations were held. The NAACP imposed a boycott upon the entire state. Finally, after prolonged and agonizing debate, the state legislature voted to remove the Confederate battle flag from the top of the capitol dome. The compromise was to place it instead at the Confederate memorial site on the front lawn. Needless to say, for many opposed to the flag's presence anywhere on government property, this was still an unsatisfactory solution. For many on the other side, it was a sad day indeed when the flag was lowered from the

capitol dome for the last time. This controversy remains a vivid and enduring reminder of how powerfully symbols can communicate.

This controversy also demonstrates how a symbol can communicate more than one thing. The cross was a symbol of punishment, shame, oppression, and torture. After the death of Jesus Christ, Christians added new meanings to this symbol, meanings that eventually superseded the old ones. The cross came to symbolize redemption, forgiveness, hope, and the power of divine love. Therefore, symbols need to be carefully, lovingly, and respectfully explained, so that all are clear about their meaning. A symbol that no one understands has no meaning at all. That's part of what John Calvin was reacting against. A symbol that comes to have conflicting meanings may well become divisive and destructive. But a symbol that is commonly understood and cherished is one of the most powerful and efficient forms of communication imaginable. Throughout history, people have given their lives for a symbol. Soldiers run to retrieve a flag dropped by a fallen comrade. Countless saints have martyred themselves for the sake of the cross. A husband or wife knows they are in big trouble if they lose their wedding ring! Our churches are filled with symbols. Do we even know what they mean? Do we rehearse their meaning together as a community of faith, to avail ourselves of their inherent power?

CAUTION - OBSTRUCTIONS AHEAD

Song, sacrament, and symbol stand as foundational elements of virtually all Christian worship. This is the Lord's design, who in both the Old and New Testaments instructs us to include them all. Churches that consistently do so have already made significant progress on the road to maintaining a healthy balance between right and left brain stimulation.

But the route is filled with roadblocks. Before we make our final observations and recommendations in Chapter Nine, there are numerous issues to consider. It will be wise to consider the practical hindrances that tend to frustrate the progress of many churches as they travel this road toward holistic worship. One such hindrance lies within the unique personality of any given Christian denomination. Each branch of the Church exhibits characteristics that makes them different from all the others. Can certain elements in each denominational personality be at the same time a strength and a weakness? That is the issue we explore in the next chapter.

Notes

1. Squire, Russel Nelson, *Church Music: Musical and Hymnological Developments in Western Christianity* (St. Louis: Bethany Press, 1962) 48
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