

WHO GETS TO KEEP THE SYMBOLS

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**Reading: The Commission on Evangelism and the Devotional Life
(The National Council of Congregational Churches)**

“From the beginning the Commission emphasized parish evangelism. It sought to discover where in the denomination the most effective work was being done in building a truly Christian church as the center of community life; to study methods and materials being used to achieve this result; and to make it known to ministers everywhere both the materials and the methods that had been found most effective.”

***The Fellowship of Prayer* was issued in 1919 for use in Lent as an aid in building the devotional spirit during these significant weeks. In 1920 *The Fellowship of Prayer* began with Ash Wednesday.¹**

The Book of Worship for Worship in Free Churches – 1948
Along with other forms of worship, their book contained a seventy-five-page section on “Orders of Worship for the Christian Year,” following the year from the Sundays of Advent in December through All Soul’s Day the following November. Lenten season services were provided for the Sundays of Lent and particularly for the special times in Holy Week, where services for Palm Sunday, Maundy Thursday, Good Friday, and Easter Sunday were proposed. Worship suggestions for Epiphany, Whitsunday, and Trinity Sunday were likewise included...²

When we think about worship in Congregational churches, we are prone to think only of Pilgrims in the 1620s, whose worship services were Spartan Calvinist ones. Those pilgrims adhered only to “the Word of

¹ Gaius Glenn Atkins and Frederick L. Fagley, *History of American Congregationalism* (Boston: The Pilgrim Press, 1942), 274.

² John Von Rohr, *The Shaping of American Congregationalism: 1620 – 1957* (Cleveland: The Pilgrim Press, 1992), 437.

God,” and would admit no other worship aids such as musical instruments, the use of candles, or symbols and images of saints and martyrs. They dreaded the possibility of idolatry and any suggestion of Catholicism. They were convinced that the Anglican Church smacked of papacy. “Preaching, prayer, and psalms of praise were the major elements in the Lord’s Day or Sabbath services, and these were practiced largely in the manner of their English and Dutch predecessors.”³ There were ambivalent and even conflicting views about baptism and the Lord’s Supper. Many were of an evangelical persuasion that affirmed “believers baptism,” the idea that one can only be baptized if one is entering into the covenant both responsible and capable of free will and conscience. Others would baptize infants if their parents were church members in full standing and known to be of exemplary faith. This is part of that confusing doctrine they called election. Almost unanimously, only those in full membership of the church could receive Holy Communion. It was considered a sacrament reserved for “the holy.”⁴

As you heard from the readings that I shared with you, the Congregational Churches of North America departed from their Colonial predecessors to embrace a fuller and larger liturgy. By 1950 the liturgical

³ Von Rohr, p. 101.

⁴ Ibid., 104 - 105

year for Congregational Churches embraced the seasons of Advent, Christmas, Lent, Easter, and Pentecost, all the way to All Soul's Sunday. We have since included special days like Worldwide Communion Sunday. With this growth in liturgy and worship Congregational Churches have come to embrace the full spectrum of liturgical aids such as paraments for their pulpits and communion tables, robes and stoles for clergy, Christmas trees with white lights or Chrismons, Advent candles and wreathes, acolytes, palms for Palm Sunday, and Easter lilies.

Why was this movement so necessary and why did Congregationalists move away from the stark worship practices of the Calvinist tradition? What has any of this got to do with Congregationalists in the 21st century, and why am I taking time to talk about it on the second Sunday in Advent? What happened to the anxiety about "papist" or Catholic influences?

Let me begin with the last question first. The wearing of a robe and stole; the use of candles, either on the Communion table or an Advent wreath; the blessing of a baptism with the sign of the cross are not the sole domain of Roman Catholicism. These and many other liturgical practices were in place long before Rome became the Holy See, even long before Christianity was ever called such a thing. The gestures of blessing,

healing, feeding, and forgiving are found in nearly every religion in the world. Jews have been lighting Sabbath candles in their homes centuries before Jesus was born. Hindus, Jains, and Sikhs have celebrated the Festival of Lights, known as *Devali*, for thousands of years. So let us be careful what religious province we give to or presume to be Rome's. And religious symbols, rituals, scriptures, and sacred office are only papist if we believe that only the pope can assign and determine the meaning and efficacy of such symbols or persons. We are Protestants and Congregationalists who believe: (1) Individual persons are responsible for interpreting the meaning of faith and its symbolic expressions; and (2) The local church is the most viable expression of the body of Christ.

Why is this important today? Why did Congregationalist move toward a more expressive and symbolic liturgy? It is important to us today because this is a season when we are flooded with religious and commercial symbols. There are extraordinary claims made upon the human imagination during this time of the year and it is often confusing and difficult for us to make any sense of it. In the early 20th century the National Council of Congregational Churches began to recognize that the entire year was rich with opportunities to nourish and enrich the lives of its members and began to recover the deeper uses of symbols. It is also

true that there are competing claims for the meaning and application for these symbols.

Think of your neighbors whose lawns are lit up with the images of the season. I remember one that had a beautiful nativity scene on one end of the lawn. Floodlights illumined the crèche, Joseph and Mary, wise men, shepherds and a variety of animals. Christmas carols like “The First Noel” boomed out from amplifiers. On the other end of the yard were Santa Claus in his sleigh, Rudolph, and eight reindeers festooned in a multi-colored light display that blinked on and off. Santa blared in loud robotic fashion, “Ho-ho-ho.” And right in the middle of the lawn were three pink plastic flamingos, totally oblivious to their seasonal neighbors. They were not in the spirit of the season what so ever.

On a deeper level let us consider where we are today. We have learned this week, in case you had not already figured it out, that we are in a recession. In fact, we have been in one for a year. One half million people lost their jobs in November. Terrorism spans the globe in India, Pakistan, Afghanistan, Iraq, and *ad nauseam*. Scientists have determined that global warming is accelerating faster than rates previously calculated. HIV/AIDS is devastating countries in Africa, Asia, and Latin America. Malawi has a population of 12 million people. One million of its citizens

– a full one twelfth – consist of children orphaned by the disease. And we dare proclaim, “Joy to the World.” We announce, “Peace on Earth,” and “Goodwill to All.” We have decorated this beautiful sanctuary with red poinsettias and a large evergreen. We have hung the greens, await a beloved Christmas music program and Children’s Christmas cantata, and planned a party. We will gather on Christmas Eve to celebrate the birth of a child in the midst of a cold and bloody world. In the crucible of violence and death we read birth stories, sing carols, light candles, and exchange gifts.

We do this because this is who we are. We are a Christian congregation gathered in “the name and spirit of Jesus,” according to our covenant. These are the songs we sing, the scriptures we read, and the symbols we use to announce good news to our world. As cold as it may be, as recessed as the economy is, as violent as the world can be, as conflicted as many religions and ideologies are, we believe that God is love, truth will set us free, beauty is yet to be discovered, and hope is always possible.

Since the mid-nineteenth century Congregationalism has recognized that symbols are essential if we are to have a vital faith. Symbols are the most basic means by which we express our faith.

Symbols are our passports to sacred encounter. And the beauty of symbols is that they are only vital when we keep them refreshed and when we allow the freedom for each person to engage the symbol and find his or her own meaning there. That, of course, is sometimes risky.

I think of the Sunday school teacher who was trying to teach her class about the symbol and meaning of the egg at Easter. She held up a large beige plastic egg and said to her class, “Does anybody know what’s inside of this?” A little boy blurted out, “Yes! Pantyhose!”

The great Protestant theologian of the 20th century, Paul Tillich, made a very important observation about symbols. Tillich distinguished signs from symbols. Signs, he observed, point to something. A street sign tells you what direction to take to reach your destination. The sign is not the destination. A symbol invites you into that which it symbolizes. In other words, you participate in the symbolic. Let me offer you an example.

When we are at a parade and the color guard passes by it is our custom to stand up, remove our caps, and place our hands over our hearts. Or if we are at a ball game and the national anthem is sung we stand, sing the anthem, and applaud. Both practices are symbolic in that each represents the United States of America. We stand, salute, and sing the

virtues of democracy, the founding of this nation, and the freedoms we continue to enjoy. We offer praise and thanks to our veterans who defend our country. In fact, those who do not observe these gestures offend us. Do you see how the symbol of the flag moves us into ritual? Do you see how we are invited into history?

These gestures cannot inform us of everything that it means to be an American. There is not offered here the Declaration of Independence or the Constitution of the United States, but we assume those documents when we say, "I pledge allegiance." All of these and more are represented in the symbol of the flag. We are allowed by these symbols to engage the principles of freedom that define us as Americans.

You can bet the last dollar in your 401k plan that each person along that parade route or in the grandstands has a different understanding of what the flag means. Each will give their interpretation a unique emphasis of meaning. Some will think of Francis Scott Key or Betsy Ross. Some will remember a child killed in battle or now serving on foreign soil. Some will imagine the huge responsibility that this nation has for democracy everywhere. Some will not think about it at all.

Paul Tillich wrote that symbols are the primary means by which we experience what he called "the Ground of Being," "Ultimate Concern," or

simply “Being.” He was not content to allow people to say that the “Ground of Being” or “Ultimate Concern” was interchangeable with the word “God.” God, too, is a symbol with limited meaning. Tillich believed that the “Ground of Being,” was greater than God or any common form of theism. To risk diluting Tillich, he thought that the “Ground of Being” was the God beyond our God.

Theology and philosophy have limited capacity to engage the “Ground of Being.” Theology is only talk about God. It is not a talk with God. Argumentation is finally futile because our words to express the Ground of Being are limited and have no lasting power. A symbol, on the other hand, cannot explain the Ground of Being, but like the flag, invites us into its expression. Let me offer you an example that has had many interpretations over the years.

Christian baptism, as first practiced in the early church, came only at the conclusion of years of training. This process of catechism taught young Christians the disciplines of faith and doctrine. The catechumens were allowed to worship with the Christian congregation. But they were dismissed from the assembly when it was time for Holy Communion.

In the Christian tradition some view baptism as a symbolic death and resurrection. In these traditions full immersion was and is preferred.

One is lowered down into death and rises up to new life. It is also thought by some that sins are washed away and the soul is cleansed.

There are still some who believe that one who is not baptized will not be able to enter into heaven. Stillborn infants are not pronounced dead until a priest can arrive and administer the sacrament of baptism.

Regardless of the interpretation, baptism remains a powerful image of inclusion in the church of God. As a ritual it serves as a symbol that invites us into a sacred encounter. The meaning of that symbol offers many possible interpretations, often depending on the age of the person.

I confess that I do not think of baptism as salvation magic. Baptism does not change the fact that we will have to make moral decisions until the moment of our death. Baptism will not prevent us from temptation or violating one moral virtue or another. Baptism will not prevent disease or mental illness. I do not even believe that Baptism is necessary for salvation.

I do believe that in the case of infants and children, baptism is the church's celebration of a human life. Baptism is the symbol whereby we enter into covenant with the child and his or her parents inviting them into our lives as a Christian community. Through the sacrament of Baptism we are claimed by a higher power to place that child's needs above our

own and commits us to his or her Christian education. We extend to their parents a hand of fellowship that dare proclaim, “You are not in this alone. We are with you.”

In the case of an adult, I believe baptism is the embrace of a man or woman into the life and teachings of Jesus. Baptism claims them for the community of faith and re-invites us to the values of generous openness, gregarious inclusion, and radical love. As a symbol, baptism brings us all into the waters of life. We are all swimming in the fountains of grace and the symbol allows us to participate for a moment in the splash of God.

This is not how you join the Rotary Club, or the National Guard, or the Parent Teachers Organization. It is a symbol of inclusion unique to the Christian church. And so at Advent and Christmas we bring forth the signs of our life in God’s love. Everyone is invited to participate. No one is coerced and the meaning is finally fulfilled in your own heart and mind. You are invited to deck the halls; to light one candle for the Maccabee children; go with us a caroling; raise the wassail cup; and celebrate the birth of an infant. Invite someone to go with you. It is cold out there and folks are lonely. Bring them to Bethlehem and follow the stars of hope.

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