



# THE SIMPLICITY

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Church Magazines

*Why do we use symbols the way we do? The reasons, like the symbols themselves, are simple but profound.*

Since the earliest days of the Church, critics have tried to uncover flaws in its teachings or history. Over the years, for example, they have tried to discredit the Prophet Joseph Smith by suggesting that he copied the ceremony and symbols used in the temple from other sources. Some have also found it strange that the Church uses such symbols and ceremonies at all.

But there are simple answers for those who are suspicious or uneasy about how we use symbols in the Church.

## **A World of Symbols**

Have you ever considered just how common symbols are?

Imagine a 17-year-old boy walking through a school. He passes by two young women he knows. Each young woman hands him a piece of paper. The first hands him an envelope with a heart-shaped sticker on it, and the second hands him a flyer with an image of a red cross on it. Without reading either one, he starts thinking about asking the first girl to a dance and giving the second girl a donation for recent flood victims. He has a different reaction to the images because each one holds a different meaning for him; in other words, they are symbols.

We live in a world of symbols. We use them all the time not only to help us communicate complex ideas quickly but also to add deeper meaning to what we say. The symbols in our lives can define who we are, what we stand for, and what groups we belong to. Almost anything can be used as a symbol: images, shapes, colors, objects, actions, gestures, words. From architecture, to art, to corporate logos, to computer icons, to national flags, to civic and religious ceremonies, symbols are all around us.

One of the greatest virtues of symbols is that they stimulate our minds and help us learn. And they are especially valuable when they make us think more clearly and deeply about things that truly matter, such as the gospel.

## **Symbols and the Spirit**

We can't comprehend the things of God by ourselves. We need His Spirit to teach us. The Apostle Paul taught:

“Eye hath not seen, nor ear heard, neither have entered into the heart of man, the things which God hath prepared for them that love him.

“But God hath revealed them unto us by his Spirit: for the Spirit searcheth all things, yea, the deep things of God” (1 Corinthians 2:9–10).

Symbols help with this spiritual communication. Through symbols, the Lord forges a link with us by using the things of this earth to represent the things of heaven. He has given us revelations, prophecies, teachings,



# OF SYMBOLS

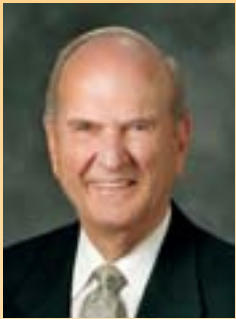
ordinances, and ceremonies filled with symbols that can give us spiritual insights if we are prepared to receive them.

Think about baptism. We put on white clothes, which represent purity.<sup>1</sup> Then we enter the water, which represents the washing away of our sins through the Atonement.<sup>2</sup> After the words of the ordinance are spoken, we are immersed in the water. Going under the water imitates the death and burial of Jesus Christ, and it also represents the death of the natural man within us. Being raised again from the water imitates the Resurrection of Jesus Christ, and it also represents being born again as disciples of Christ under covenant to follow Him.<sup>3</sup>

The symbolism of baptism draws our thoughts to Christ and causes us to ponder the connection between the symbol and what it represents. Our minds are then more focused on spiritual matters, so the Holy Ghost is better able to bridge the gap and teach us “the deep things of God.”

## **The Lord’s Way from the Beginning**

The scriptures tell us that the Lord has used symbolism from the very beginning to teach people about Christ’s Atonement. He commanded Adam to sacrifice animals, but at first Adam didn’t know why, except to be obedient. An angel then came to him and explained that the sacrifice was “a similitude of the sacrifice of the Only Begotten of



“Each temple is a house of learning. There we are taught in the Master’s way. His way differs from modes of others. His way is ancient and rich with symbolism. We can learn much by pondering the reality for which each symbol stands. The teachings of the temple are beautifully simple and simply beautiful. They are understood by the humble, yet they can excite the intellect of the brightest minds.”

**Elder Russell M. Nelson  
of the Quorum of the  
Twelve Apostles, *Ensign*,  
May 2001, 33.**

the Father, which is full of grace and truth” (Moses 5:7). In other words, the angel taught Adam that the animal he sacrificed represented the Savior, who, though He would be without sin, would freely give His life to atone for the sins of the world.

Later, the Lord taught Adam about baptism and explained its symbolism of rebirth. Afterward He told Adam that “all things have their likeness, and all things are created and made to bear record of me, both things which are temporal, and things which are spiritual; things which are in the heavens above, and things which are on the earth, and things which are in the earth, and things which are under the earth, both above and beneath: all things bear record of me” (Moses 6:63).

Nephi also learned this truth, and he showed his people that “all things which have been given of God from the beginning of the world, unto man, are the typifying of [Christ]” (2 Nephi 11:4).

This is why gospel symbols are so powerful—not because they are mysterious or exotic, but because they point our minds to literal realities about the plan of salvation and our relationship to our Heavenly Father and His Son, Jesus Christ. They teach us about the Savior’s Atonement and what we have to do to be saved and exalted in the celestial kingdom.

### **Symbols and Ordinances**

So how does the temple figure in all this?

First of all, for those who have doubts about the origins of temple symbols and ceremonies, we have a simple answer. Gospel ordinances and symbols, including those found in the temple, are as old as Adam and Eve, but because people fell away from the truth, only scattered fragments of

the original ordinances were passed down among them. So it is not at all surprising that various other religions and groups throughout the world use some of those symbols, though not with their original meaning and purpose.<sup>4</sup>

Secondly, for people who feel uncomfortable about temple symbols and ceremonies, we simply point out that symbols are a familiar part of our everyday lives to begin with. The particular symbols we use may be unfamiliar to some people. Even something as common to us as bowing our heads for a prayer may appear strange to someone seeing it for the first time. If people are properly prepared, however, attending the temple can be a familiar experience. They will see that it follows the pattern the Lord has used from the beginning of mankind, teaching us through symbols and the influence of the Spirit so that we can gain an eternal perspective on our lives.

The temple ordinances are sacred. Holding them sacred means that we don’t talk about them outside the temple. But the Savior invites *all* people to come unto Him, and anyone who comes unto Him and remains faithful in the Church is eventually invited to go to the temple to be taught in the Lord’s way.

By restoring the ordinances of the temple through the Prophet Joseph Smith, the Lord has reached out to mankind as He has always done, revealing things through symbols that are simple enough for us to recognize but profound enough to allow the Spirit to give us a glimpse of things that “eye hath not seen.”

<sup>1</sup> See Alma 5:21; 13:12.

<sup>2</sup> See Alma 7:14.

<sup>3</sup> See John 3:1–6; Romans 6:3–9.

<sup>4</sup> See Robert L. Millet, “The Eternal Gospel,” *Ensign*, July 1996, 48–56.





## EXTRA! EXTRA!

To find out more about gospel symbols, you can look up the following articles in the Gospel Library at [www.lds.org](http://www.lds.org): “Why Symbols” (*Ensign*, Feb. 2007, 16); “Understanding Scriptural Symbols,” by Gerald N. Lund (*Ensign*, Oct. 1986); “All Things Testify of Him,” by Lenet Hadley Read (*Ensign*, Jan. 1981); “Symbols from the Scriptures That Testify of Christ,” by William O. Nelson (*Ensign*, June 1973).

To learn more about the temple, you can read the booklet “Preparing to Enter the Holy Temple,” available through [www.ldscatalog.com](http://www.ldscatalog.com) or on [www.lds.org](http://www.lds.org) in the Gospel Library under Lessons and then Optional Courses.