

Signs, Symbols, and Standing for Truth by Pastor Marty

The last two newsletters have dealt with gender definition and sexual identity. These are loaded topics because many progressive groups in our country desire to redefine human nature. Proponents of this new interpretation of reality are not happy with simply being able to live differently or view the world differently than others; they actually demand that everybody else has to accept and affirm their beliefs, and any rejection of their relativistic worldview is considered the same as bigotry, intolerance, or hating them personally. They have, on a primal level, equated their personal beliefs with their individual identities. Outside of these groups, there are two sets of people who affirm their agenda: Some agree with this redefinition of humanity while some do not but still believe there is no harm in allowing others to “live and let live” as they desire. As terrifying as it may sound, there are some who identify themselves as Christian who actually support the accelerated destruction of God’s creation in the name of appeasing the world. This myopic perspective fails to understand the extent that foundational changes to our worldview would significantly affect all of our future generations.

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Our understanding of personal identity and human nature is only one part of a larger political, social, and ethical war that is waging within our culture between these two opposing camps, each elevating some precepts or values over others. This conflict is also reflected in the different methodical approaches of our judicial branch of government where some claim the Constitution must be interpreted according to its “original” context and meaning while others believe it is a “living” and fluid document that adapts to culture. While some laws clearly have

outlived culture—such as prohibitions against allowing a donkey to sleep in a bathtub or of crossing state lines with a duck on your head—there are significant disagreements about other changes. It is no coincidence that the Church and her orthodox view of reality is often the prime target in these skirmishes: the Bible has the ability to speak to a changing culture by actually maintaining its original and intended meaning. From a spiritual viewpoint, this is due to inspiration, the active Presence of the Spirit who is Holy; from a rational perspective, this is because it is made up of more than sixty books by more than forty authors over thousands of years in numerous cultures and settings. There is no culture or situation outside of its purview.

There is no culture or situation that is outside of the purview of the Scriptures.

Because the Bible provides an absolute and unchanging standard of truth and morality, any significant commitment to it will elevate a culture and limit its degradation. God’s Word, whether written, spoken, or practiced, draws civilization upward. As Paul wrote to the Church in Rome, human nature only improves to the extent that God is worshipped and honored; when people reject who and what God is, their “worship” automatically devolves. In the case of actual idol worship, rejecting God resulted in the worship of idols made first in the forms of men and women, then of birds and of animals, and finally of crawling creatures. In the process, human nature itself devolved into something animalistic and impulsive. Here, we recognize a psychological truth that is difficult for many people to accept: hatred and unforgiveness toward an enemy will make a person more like the enemy; it is why many victims will become abusers themselves or will develop significant dysfunctions. This is true because it is based on

a spiritual truth: we become like the thing we worship. Because we were created “a little bit lower than elohim,” our worshipping anything except God is actually worshipping something lower than our created nature, and we devolve. God did not repeatedly judge idolatry in the Old Testament because He is an insecure deity; He did it because it degrades human nature. All of His commands, including those that are the politically incorrect and personally undesirable ones, are primarily for our benefit—not His.

All of God's commandments, including the undesirable ones, are for our benefit.

In a prior newsletter, I stated that the way was paved for the National Socialists (i.e., the Nazi party) to gain power in Germany more than a century earlier with specific theological changes. As liberal theology grew, there was a re-definition of God and a re-valuation of the Bible; they both were judged to be less absolute and less incarnational than orthodox Christianity maintained. When the Bible could be subject to human literary critiques and “modern” principles of hermeneutics, then the concept of ultimate authority and supernatural inspiration was lost. At that point, scriptures could be reinterpreted or dismissed as needed. As theologians in sheep’s clothing negated the inerrancy of scripture, dismissed the miracles of the Bible, and relegated moral restrictions to ancient cultures, the anchor to truth was lost. Instead of recognizing that truth was still truth even though it was phrased in cultural contexts, many parts of scripture were simply rejected outright. A widespread change to liturgy (i.e., the common terminology and practice within Christian churches) logically followed. By their not standing against these changes, the Church in Germany became significantly weaker when it came to resisting many of the erupting social changes—including changes to the way society valued and defined gender. By the time those social changes had matured, the destruction of

definition was so ingrained within the culture that a majority of the population did not even notice anything was wrong. If we do not take a stand when things the issues seem to be small, we may not be able to stand when they get big.

If we do not stand up for small things, we may not be able to stand for big ones.

As described, a poor view of Scripture erodes culture and morality even more than a poor view of the Constitution erodes society’s law and ethics. However, the same process is at work in both cases. The individual words still have the same meaning, but the significance, value, and authority of the text is changed. In essence, this is the reduction (and destruction) of our symbolic system. Language is a system of communication where words represent actions, objects, or ideas. For example, the word “tree” is a textual representation of a large plant that grows outside. However, the depth of meaning can vary for different people: for children, the term brings to their mind something they climb, swing from, or sit under for shade; for building contractors, the word suggests an obstacle to be cleared for gaining space and lumber; for environmentalists, it is an extremely priceless source of fresh air and life. The word still has the same objective definition, but the context and the significance tend to change its personal meaning. In effect, we look at the same symbol but interpret it slightly differently. The major danger today is that our culture’s symbolic system is becoming increasingly shallow. Today, the average person has a working vocabulary of about 3,000 words; when we compare this to the average working vocabulary of 54,000 words in Shakespeare’s time, the difference is alarming. It seems that as our knowledge of the world has been increasing, our actual capacity to understand it has been steadily decreasing.

As our overall knowledge has increased, our capacity to understand has decreased.

This loss of comprehension as a society is not limited to vocabulary. If we consider our legal system, we know that the most solemn and serious ceremonies would involve people placing their hands upon a Bible and making an oath before God. This act was chosen precisely because it was considered the most sacrosanct thing a person could do; in other words, only the most depraved and immoral person would ever break that oath. Today, that oath has so little value in our society that it has essentially lost all meaning; any respect for a legal oath today is due to fear of consequences, not a fear of the Lord. The Bible has lost its value as a symbol of holiness, truth, and morality in our culture. The danger that many do not realize is that the erosion of our symbols will result in a reinforcing cycle: the more that people choose to minimize the value of the Bible, the more it loses its value in the eyes of the people. If we imagine a sink full of water, we recognize that as long as the plug fits into the drain, there is no noticeable loss of water; however, once the plug gets pulled, the water not only begins to drain but also does so with increasing speed. Similarly, the longer someone is bedridden, the weaker their legs become until they eventually cannot walk or even stand. As our symbols lose value, our ability to respect them weakens, and then they begin to lose value even faster.

As our symbols begin to lose value, our ability to respect those symbols weakens.

As a culture and as individuals, the value of our symbols is vitally important because our symbols define our values. As an example of this, we need only to think of a wedding ring. The placing of the ring upon the finger during the ceremony of holy matrimony was a solemn commitment to a lifelong covenant before God. Although divorce has always existed, it was much more the exception than the rule. The stigma associated with divorce was a sign that the covenant of marriage was not to be taken

lightly. The value of the marriage oath was held so highly by our society that husbands and wives endured a great deal in order to honor it. The wedding ring, as a symbol of the marriage oath, was given special honor so that removing it was an act of profound disrespect. However, there began to be an increase in divorce rates in the late 1950s and early 1960s. With that increase came a demand for the laws to change so getting a divorce would be easier. The laws were revised, which immediately opened the floodgates. By the early 1970s, the divorce rate in the United States had jumped from about 1 in 5 to more than 1 in 3, and by the end of that decade, more than half of all marriages ended in divorce. People now get married with the expectation that they can easily get a divorce if it “does not work out,” and staying married is an exception instead of the rule. Wedding rings, which were symbols of lifelong covenant and commitment, are a lucrative business now, and they can be leased instead of purchased. The more that people got divorced, the less value society put upon marriage, and the less they valued marriage, the easier it became to get a divorce. The divorce rate did drop in the 1980s, but it was because people began cohabitating without bothering to marry. Society changes according to the value we put on our symbols.

Our society and our laws will change according to the value of our symbols.

Today, we see big disagreements taking place around the American flag. A nation’s flag is its primary symbol of its values and identity as a country. The United States of America is certainly not a perfect country, and we might have as many flaws as we have ideals. Still, we each make the choice to see our flag either as a symbol of what is good in our country or as a representation of what is bad. This is a choice we make, and it is much more significant than many of us are led to realize. It is commonplace for people to burn the flag or kneel during the

national anthem, a song designated specifically for the purpose of honoring the flag. These actions, radically different from holding a hand over our hearts, are done as a form of protest against flaws in our society. Now, protesting is a good thing, but doing so by disrespecting the flag destroys the very symbol that promotes the best things the country represents. Those who do this have redefined the meaning of the symbol. As they give less honor and respect to the flag, they declare that this country and its ideals deserve less respect, and as more people lose respect for the country, the value of those ideals will be diminished in the eyes of society. By choosing to redefine the symbol, they are reinforcing the destruction they are claiming to protest. It is equivalent to protesting divorce by refusing to get married. Because the symbol directly connects to the object, our treatment of the symbol will actually shape our attitude toward the object. To present the issue bluntly, if we see the flag as a symbol of freedom and justice, we will stand and affirm those ideals; if we have disdain for it, we kneel to the impulse to allow our country to become the Germany of the Socialist (Nazi) party. The way we treat our symbols affects what we become as a people.

Our attitudes toward our symbols decide what we are individually and corporately.

Those who do not go to a church with a high view of the liturgy or the sacraments may see those things as vain religiousness or even as superstition. In many cases, there are people who go through the motions without actually understanding what they are doing. When I was a child, I attended that type of church. I would stand, kneel, bow, or make the sign of the cross at different times. It was something that we all did, but it was not really explained. Since then, I have done research into the early Church, and I have discovered the purpose for many parts of the liturgy. Before I continue on that thread, I want to describe certain experiences I have had

in Pentecostal and Charismatic churches. There have been certain times during worship when I sensed God's presence, and the impression of His holiness was so strong that I had to kneel or even lay flat on the ground. At those times, my action was a symbolic gesture of worship. I can attest that there was absolutely nothing about "going through the motions" at that time! I was being entirely genuine. Of course, I don't kneel every time a song plays, but there certainly are times when I experience a bit of that again with a certain song, and I want to do more than just sing. Prior to the rise of the Enlightenment era, almost everybody had such a supernatural view of God's immanence in the world that they saw Him as always ready to break into "real life" to do miraculous things. When they would gather to celebrate communion, they felt such a sense of awe and wonder as they remembered what the bread and wine meant that they naturally bowed. The symbolic act of bowing before the table held so much meaning to them that the act then triggered an increase of faith as well as a renewed commitment. The cycle worked in a positive way—until modern thought erased the expectation of the miraculous from our culture.

Modern thought has largely erased the expectation of miracles from our culture.

The point of this newsletter is not to get everyone to run and join a liturgical church, for it is not for everyone. However, there is a need for God's people to recognize the importance and need of restoring symbolism to our lives. If we do not have good Christian symbolism in our hearts and minds, two things happen: first, we become susceptible to dark imagery, such as pornography, violence, and fear; second, we become desensitized to dangerous symbolism that leading to evil, ignorance, and deception. If we don't restore and nurture good symbols in our lives and culture, we are leaving a vacuum that will be filled with something else. Light will drive out darkness, but we must invite the light.