

Scriptural Symbols and Certificates

By Elder David Pyles

One peculiar aspect of the Bible that proves confusing to many Christians is that it commonly presents symbols as though they were the very things being symbolized. Accordingly, virtual certificates can be presented as though they were the things being certified. In this article, I hope to present numerous examples of this, and to discuss errant ideas that commonly derive from failure to understand the point.

1) My first example will be very familiar to most Christians:

And he took the cup, and gave thanks, and gave it to them, saying, Drink ye all of it; For this is my blood of the new testament, which is shed for many for the remission of sins. – Mt 26:27-28

Note that Christ did not say the wine in the cup merely *represented* His blood, though all sound Christians know this is what He meant. He actually described the symbol as though it were the thing being symbolized. Some Christians, for failure to understand the scriptural habit here considered, have arrived at the errant doctrine of transubstantiation, which says there is some mystical sense in which the communion wine actually becomes the blood of Christ when ingested.

It is strange that these same Christians, after failing to see the point in one place, will readily acknowledge it in another. Consider:

2) After Abraham proved obedient in willing to offer his own son Isaac, God made promise to Abraham, saying:

By myself have I sworn, saith the Lord, for because thou hast done this thing, and hast not withheld thy son, thine only son: That in blessing I will bless thee, and in multiplying I will multiply thy seed as the stars of the heaven, and as the sand which is upon the sea shore; and thy seed shall possess the gate of his enemies; And in thy seed shall all the nations of the earth be blessed; because thou hast obeyed my voice. – Gen 22:16-18

Now if we take this text exactly for what it says, then the obedience of Abraham is presented as the clear reason for the

salvation of the nations. However, all Christians know that the offering of Isaac was actually symbolic of God offering His Son on the cross, and all Christians also know that salvation is really in the antitype, not in the type. But the actual wording of the text attributes to the symbol the very efficacy of what it symbolizes.

3) Another famous instance of this scriptural habit is in the great prayer of Jesus for the salvation of His people. Jesus said in the midst of this prayer:

And this is life eternal, that they might know thee the only true God, and Jesus Christ, whom thou hast sent...—Jn 17:3-4

Knowledge of God and Christ – meaning a loving familiarity of them – is the sure mark and certification of an eternally saved state. Again, the certification is presented as though it were the thing being certified.

4) My next example has been the subject of much debate among Christians, but I say the controversy mostly derives from failure to apply the principle here presented:

But to him that worketh not, but believeth on him that justifieth the ungodly, his faith is counted for righteousness.
– Rom 4:5

This leads to the question: In what sense is faith counted for righteousness? Some have interpreted this as saying that faith is an active obedience of the sinner that God *rewards with* the righteousness of Christ. In this view, faith is a *cause* of righteousness. Other Christians explain that faith is a passive obedience (i.e. produced by God’s grace) that God uses as an instrument or *means* of applying righteousness. However, I think the better explanation is that faith is a passive obedience that is a *certificate* of righteousness. That is, faith is neither a cause nor means to righteousness, but is the official declaration of it. The problem with the first two positions is that they insert or replace words in the text. For example, it did not say that “faith is *rewarded* with righteousness.” Rather, it said, “*faith is counted for righteousness.*” The actual wording of the text attributes to faith a greater role than is done by either of the first two positions. Faith is a God-given certificate of the righteousness of Christ, but the Bible can present certificates as though they were the very things being certified. This means

that faith is here presented as though it were the very righteousness of Christ Himself. This lands us in a sensible spot. All sound Christians know that, regardless of the path taken, the righteousness that is imputed in the end must be the righteousness of Christ. No other explanation makes sense.

5) The next example comes from the time that Jesus was baptized. John the Baptist thought himself unworthy to administer it, but Jesus exhorted him, saying:

Suffer it to be so now: for thus it becometh us to fulfil all righteousness... – Mt 3:15

“*All righteousness*” in this text literally means *all* the righteousness that the human race will ever have. It was *all* secured by the death, burial and resurrection of Jesus Christ. All of the elect of God, being legally accounted in Him, also died when He died and were raised when He was resurrected. Now all of this was symbolized in His baptism. However, Jesus did not tell John, “it becometh us to *symbolize* all righteousness.” He presented the symbol as though it were the thing being symbolized.

6) Again, when Paul was speaking of our own baptism, he said:

For if we have been planted together in the likeness of his death, we shall be also in the likeness of his resurrection... – Rom 6:5

For failure to see the principle being discussed, many have errantly used this verse to teach that baptism is a necessary condition for eternal salvation. Water baptism is indeed the duty of all believers, but the text did not present baptism as a *necessary* condition; rather, it presented baptism as a *sufficient* one. The text actually states that all, without exception, who have been “*planted together*” (i.e. baptized) will also be “*in the likeness of his resurrection.*” Now this statement might appear to present a problem for all Christians, even those teaching the necessity of water baptism, because none of them teach that baptism is itself sufficient. However, the problem dissipates when we understand that water baptism is *symbolic* of the death, burial and resurrection of Christ, and therefore symbolic of what is both necessary and sufficient for our salvation, either meeting its conditions or assuring they will be met. As Paul said, “*It is a faithful saying: For if we be dead with him, we*

shall also live with him,” (2Tim 2:11). Water baptism is symbolic of this same truth, but the Bible, in following its common habit, can describe types as though they were antitypes.

7) The next scripture is also misinterpreted by many in our times:

Verily I say unto you, There be some standing here, which shall not taste of death, till they see the Son of man coming in his kingdom. – Mt 16:28

Some have taught from this text that the second coming of Jesus is not in our future, but that it was somehow mystically fulfilled within the lifetime of the apostles. In reply to this absurdity, this statement was made in all synoptic gospels (Mt 26:18, Mk 9:1, Lk 9:27), and in all such accounts, it was immediately followed by a description of events on the mount of transfiguration. At that time, three of the disciples (Peter, James and John) saw Christ transfigured in glory. When Peter recounted this event late in his life (2Pet 1:16-18), he explained that it *foreshadowed* the second coming of Christ, and that it also served to certify the event. As should be clear by now, the Bible sometimes presents certifying events as being the events that are certified. Such is the case here.

8) My last example returns to the Old Testament, but actually pertains to the final coming of Christ. When God gave specifications for the rituals on the Day of Atonement, He ordered that the High Priest was to first enter the Holiest of All with incense and coals taken from the altar, and that he was to put the incense to the coals to form a cloud over the Mercy Seat. After this, he was to sprinkle blood on the Mercy Seat seven times. Now God said concerning this cloud:

...for I will appear in the cloud upon the mercy seat. – Lev 16:2

Scriptures do not say that anything extraordinary necessarily appeared in the eye of the High Priest. The importance was in the symbolic intent. Jesus will appear in clouds when He returns (Mt 24:30, 26:64, Rev 1:7), and this is what was being symbolized. At the time He returns with clouds, none will be spared except those who have been mercifully sprinkled by His blood. This, too, was symbolized by the ritual. The cloud over the Mercy Seat was symbolic of the clouds with which Christ will appear, but the

actual wording of the text said that God actually appeared over the Mercy Seat itself.

These many examples should be sufficient to prove the point, and I think they also demonstrate its importance because of the many errors that are corrected when the point is fully understood.

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