

# **Symbols and Salvation**



# Symbols and Salvation

Chauncey C. Riddle

This article is an attempt to set in orderly perspective certain elements of the process of obtaining an exaltation. No pretense is made to elucidation of any mystery, nor should the order of the ideas herein be confused with the Gospel. The justification for the existence of this work is the sincere hope that members of The Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints who understand the Gospel may receive some further insight into and appreciation of its greatness and of the urgency of serving the Lord with all of their heart, might, mind, and strength through the Gospel plan. To that end, then, I assert the following thesis: *Qualifying for exaltation consists essentially in the proper ordering of symbols.*

## Symbols and Mental Life

We must first take account of certain features of the correlation of the mental and physical actions of men. The conscious physical experience of human beings is a mental recording or registration of the influences of the environment that work upon the physical body. This experience is composed of "ideas," mental elements having a possibility of persistence and somewhat subject to recall. The most important aspect of these ideas for our purpose is that every experience-idea is a symbol. If it is a memory, it is a symbol of a past situation; if it is a sensation, it is a symbol of a present external configuration of physical affections; if it is imagination, it is a symbol of some future or possible experience. That which is symbolized by a given symbol is its referent. If an idea is true, it will have a one-to-one correspondence with certain elements of the referent which it symbolizes. In addition to its referent, each idea-symbol has a meaning, which meaning consists essentially in expectations for future sensation associated with the given idea. Idea-symbols thus become the basis for all conscious reaction to our environment. We act so that the most desirable possible consequent known to be available to us will become a reality, a future present-sensation.

An example may serve to clarify these general statements. As a man in our culture sees an automobile, a mental image of that automobile forms in his mind. This image is for him a symbol of that externally real object. Away from it, he can call the symbol to mind and contemplate the automobile by analyzing the corresponding elements of the ideas. Through his imagination he can mentally dissociate the parts and reassemble them,

perhaps in new form or with new elements and components. This latter process of mental creation is the key to all invention. The meaning of the automobile symbol is what he expects from the various components; if he imagines it to have a horn, he would expect to be able to produce a noise; if it has pneumatic tires, he would expect a certain comfort of ride and contingency of continued serviceability.

Language complicates the idea-object symbol relation by introducing a secondary level of symbolization. Words "mean" the ideas which we each individually associate with them. In common sense we sometimes think that when we talk of Provo that what we "mean" by the word "Provo" is the physical city itself. Reflection shows that all we can possibly mean is some kind of amalgamated memory of all the experiences we have had in relation to the physical city; we "mean" the ideas we remember about the physical city. If we have never personally experienced Provo, we will mean by the name "Provo" only those ideas which we have habitually come to associate with that name. Words are, then, symbols of ideas, those ideas being mental symbols of actual or imagined external physical objects and events.

Man's mental life may be described as a Symbolic awareness of external reality and a symbolic preparation or planned reaction to that reality on the basis of understood possibilities of given situations. A man reacts to a moving automobile by removing himself from its path. Or he satisfies the need for change of place by recognizing in the idea of automobile the possibility of transportation. Mental life is internal symbolic adaptation to the realities and possibilities of the external world, both the internal and the external being equally real and necessary to man's existence and to the satisfaction of his desires.

The mental symbolism by which each person adapts himself to his environment and seeks satisfaction of his desires necessarily involves elements which have no present counterpart in sensation. We react to the here and now on the basis of an imagined continuity of today with yesterday and all prior days, and with tomorrow and all future times. We react to the place in which we find ourselves at present by imagining a continuity of the place we see with other places we have seen or have heard about or which we suppose exist. Our minds use, as it were, great maps of time and space which we take as accurate symbols representing external reality. We are able to use these maps because of the physical reality attached by present sensation to certain points of contact with those maps, and also because using them has in the past enabled us to predict our sensations of future times and different places with a high degree of accuracy. On the framework of these time and space maps we construct mentally the whole physical universe and its past, present, and future. We add details of geography, objects, persons, and events in accordance with the range and depth

of our observation and education. The inner world of mental construct tends to become a symbol of the universe, seen, as it were, *sub species eternitas*, without regard to particular perspective of time and place but in regard to the whole of space and events at once, emphasis changing from place to place as the attention varies.

One business of science is the implementation and correction of the social thought-symbol of the universe using purely physical data. In science, the details of present sensation are carefully incorporated into the conceptions of the universe that relate to present time, then inductively distributed backward and forward in time by the principle of uniformity. Theories of things not sensed at all are invented to fill the remaining gaps. The infinitesimal, the infinite, and the distant, all of which are outside the realm of sensation, are imagined and added to the universe-symbol on the basis of what is consistent with and possibly explanatory of the elements of present sensation. The ultimate scientific criterion for creation of the universe-symbol is that all ideas incorporated must be either directly observable or be theoretical projections having an economizing and predictive function. One special aspect of science is that the modern scientific universe symbol is naturalistic; its constructs must be limited to matter or energy in motion in relation to other matter or energy, specifically rejecting the existence of God, spirits, devils, etc.

The practical advantage of the human universe-symbol is enormous. If a man wants, say, to erect a factory at a certain spot, he employs an architect to plan a building. He has in his mind a general idea of the functional requirements of the desired structure. He symbolizes this mental image in words or drawings which the architect or engineer must interpret to form a mental image which will have a one-to-one correspondence with the functional necessities of the project envisioned by his client. The architect or engineer must then imaginatively create an image or mental symbol of a building which will at the same time satisfy those functional necessities and also the necessities of sturdy structural characteristics and proper adaptation to the building site in accordance with the details and regularities of his own scientific world-image. This new mental symbol of the building is given a physical symbolism in blueprints and specifications. The building contractor then seeks to order the materials of nature and manufacture to build the physical structure in accordance with his understanding or mental symbol of what was intended by the creator of the blueprints and specifications. The finished physical structure is then put into operation by the entrepreneur; if it fulfills his functional needs, then everyone is satisfied and symbols have served as could nothing else in achieving that satisfaction.

In summary, human life is a constant interplay and adjustment of reality to mental symbol, and vice versa. As we observe the world, we adjust

the mental symbol to reality; as we work and create, we adjust reality to our mental symbols. Questions of metaphysics aside, mind and matter are profoundly and functionally related.

### **Learning the Gospel**

We noted that the scientific world-image is naturalistic. It contains no gods or demons, spirits or spiritual forces, dead or unborn men. Furthermore, the scientific world-image is quite neutral in relation to values; it can sometimes tell men how to get what they want, but never what they must or should want.

The message known as the Gospel of Jesus Christ is, in the framework of our discussion, an opportunity for men to add to and to correct their mental image of the universe in such a way that they can more successfully achieve their desires and avoid unpleasant experiences. It teaches men that there are gods in heaven and that we are their children; that there are spiritual influences of both uplifting and degrading effect; that we must account for all of our trespasses against our fellowmen; and that we may receive the assistance of one Jesus Christ if we think enough of our fellowmen to try to make amends for whatever sorrow we have brought into the world. The Gospel teaches men who already believe in a god how they should conceive of him and what they can do to please him, to put themselves in a position to receive his assistance. The Gospel, then, instructs men on how to construct and furnish their mental construct of the universe in relation to the things which most of them cannot see. One who has seen and personally knows of the truth of what he says bears witness to men of the divinity of Jesus of Nazareth and of our Lord's literal resurrection and appearance in the latter days. He testifies that the power and influence of the Holy Ghost is real, and that peace and joy are the fruits of living by the Spirit. He who hears the Gospel message truly delivered will be touched himself with a spiritual experience, the witness of the Spirit to the truth of the words of the missionary, a veritable specimen of the actual spiritual reality about which the missionary is talking. Pricked in conscience and mind by living evidence of a dimension of reality which he had previously discounted or only imagined, the hearer of the Gospel is then moved with Peter's hearers to exclaim, "Men and brethren, what shall I do?" Already sensing the power of the Gospel message and the authority of him who speaks, he feels drawn to the minister of salvation and hungers for further word.

Having already explained to his hearer the essential personages which should be part of his world-symbol, the messenger proceeds to relate the requirements of salvation, the opportunities which those divine personages have made possible. The hearer of the Word is told of the importance of faith, obedience to the directions of the Savior; of the wonderful opportunity

of repentance; of the covenant and promises of baptism; and of the comfort and guidance possible after receiving the Gift of the Holy Ghost by the laying on of hands. In short, the messenger attempts to create certain ideas of divine standards of conduct, setting an ideal pattern after the fashion of the architect's blueprint. But the missionary is not the architect, for his message is vague, general and in the vernacular. The Lord is the architect. It is his Holy Spirit which clarifies to the mind of the hearer the specific standards and ideas suggested by the missionary. The workings of the Spirit are analogous to the engineer who takes the rough intentions of his client and transforms them into precise and realistic specifications; so does the Spirit accompany the necessarily vague and limited utterances of the missionary to create in the mind of the hearer exact and precise symbols or ideal standards. All this is so that the demands of perfect justice and divine mercy might not be rendered inapplicable through total dependence on human communication with its necessary faults and limitations. The Lord sees that all men are sufficiently instructed in good and evil.

Thus it is that a man is saved no faster than he gains knowledge. That is to say, his ability to please God is limited by the awareness he has of the exact ideal standards of the Gospel he must abide in order to have faith in the Lord Jesus Christ. The first requisite for salvation is, then, repentance. In repentance a person must order his mental image of the universe to include all the following: the Father; the Son; the Holy Ghost; the spirits of men who are dead; the spirits of the unborn, angels, and devils; the Gifts of the Spirit; the powers of Satan; Adam and Eve; the Fall of man; the Atonement of Jesus Christ; the Priesthood and keys; the Day of Judgment; the Church of Jesus Christ; the prophets, seers and revelators; the Gospel ordinances; the visions and revelations of Joseph Smith; the historicity and divinity of the Bible, the Pearl of Great Price, the Book of Mormon, and the Doctrine and Covenants; and the divine leadership of the living prophet, etc. Within the framework of these persons, things and events, the person must order his mental symbol of the universe to include the standards and laws of the celestial kingdom, the love for the Lord with all one's heart, might, mind, and strength, and obedience to all His commandments. He will project in his mind the heavenly city which all the prophets have longed to see, where no one hurts or destroys, where all the pure in heart dwell in righteousness under the leadership of the Savior. While it is true that no one will receive precise concepts of all these things before he accepts the Gospel, in the process of earning his exaltation he must come to have a true understanding or mental image of all these things. The first step in salvation, then, is to order one's mental image of the universe to include true spiritual realities as one is taught them. Only then is he prepared to live the Gospel, seeing and doing all with the perspective of spiritual eternity.

## Living the Gospel

Having attained an adequate mental basis for the proper living of the Gospel, if a person then desires the association of the gods and the blessings they can bestow, it is incumbent upon him to act according to the specific prescriptions of those divine personages. If he can change the natural actions of his life so that he conforms to the new standards they have put into his mind, he then can be saved. For example, he learns that not only must he avoid fornication and adultery, but that he must avoid every thought or desire of physical pleasure which is outside the precise bounds of righteousness the Lord has established. He then labors to fill his mind with the words of the scriptures, to garnish his thoughts with virtue, to remember the Savior always, to be led by the Spirit to understand why unchastity is such a terrible abomination; that through all this he might come to have the pure love of Christ toward all men and no longer desire any kind of evil. This lifting of one's actions to measure up precisely to the standards of celestial law is called "justification," the process of becoming a just or law-abiding man. This achievement is possible only under the constant tutelage of the Holy Ghost. This process is also known as finding the strait and narrow way. We enter the gate, which is acceptance of the first principles and ordinances, and then begin the struggle to tread the path to exaltation. We must struggle against the temptations of good things apart from divinely prescribed conditions, temptations of pride, of intellect, of physical attainments, of the flattery and cunning of worldly persons, of the shame of the world, and against the taunts of unholy men. If we can humble ourselves sufficiently to receive and be obedient to the Spirit, then no worldly influence can block or thwart our treading of the straight and narrow. As a little child submits to his father, so we then become meek, submissive, patient, and full of love that we might receive grace upon grace, the light of truth growing brighter and brighter in us until the perfect day, the day we become perfect by obeying the enticings of the Holy Spirit in all that we do.

The straitness of the way to exaltation varies as we progress. It always directs us squarely to our goal, but varies in its breadth. The closer we come to living celestial laws, the more particular will the Spirit be in warning us of pitfalls. What the Spirit allows us to do in our early weakness, it will forbid us to do in our later strength of increased righteousness. As fast as we can receive and live the principles of righteousness, we are led on unto perfection, wherein we do only that which we are directed to do. Living the Gospel, then, is bringing our treatment of real physical things and events into accord with the standard of saintly action prescribed by the Lord and described in detail to us by the Spirit. It is the adequation of the of a free agent to the specifications of a celestial symbol through human willingness and divine spiritual power.



But the importance of symbols does not end with the mental image of the world which a saint enjoys. There is yet another level of symbolism which might be illuminated. For the real elements of the physical world—the persons, things, and events—are all themselves symbols of a yet greater reality. These are neither linguistic nor mental symbols; rather are they physical realities symbolic of things spiritual, present realities symbolic of things future. To distinguish these special symbols which are the referent and physical reality of the Gospel standard, and at the same time are the symbols of a spiritual and future reality, let us call them “surrogates”: that which stands in the stead of. Surrogates are special symbols because, in opposition to linguistic or mental symbols, they have more than instrumental or operational value. Surrogates are intrinsically valuable as realities in their own right, and cannot be expended or disregarded in favor of their referent. In fact, the surrogate provides a unique access to the referent. Whereas the linguistic symbol is a matter of custom and convenience, proper action toward gospel surrogates is the only way of obtaining the ultimate which they symbolize.

Let us examine a specific instance of a surrogate. The celestial standard is that we treat each human being with perfect and complete kindness and love; be he friend or enemy, we must not condemn, but bear witness to the truth; not wish evil against him, but pray for him; not harm, but return good for evil. Each human being is a surrogate or symbol of our Savior, Jesus Christ, and whatsoever we do unto the least of our brethren, even so we do it unto him. If we would be exalted, we must learn and come to have in our minds that celestial standard. We must then bring our actions up to that Standard, treating each of our fellowmen as if he were the Savior. Thus realizing that each person is a symbol or surrogate of the Savior, we learn to relate properly to those symbols in the real world, that is, to treat that person in such a way that we may become worthy of enjoying the personal presence of the Savior and do for him directly what we now do only for his surrogate. Only if we treat his surrogate as we should treat him, may we receive the Lord. This surrogate is thus a unique factor in gaining the ultimate spiritual reward we seek.

Other examples of the surrogate-symbol relationship are as follows. A man's wife in the new and everlasting covenant is a surrogate of the blessings of that covenant and a symbol of the covenant itself. If he dishonors her in thought or in act, he dishonors that covenant; if he does not repent, he cuts himself off from the blessings of the covenant. The children a man and wife have are surrogates of a numberless posterity. Their physical possessions, of land, animals, and things, are surrogates of an eternal physical dominion. Their priesthood is a surrogate of the full powers of godhood. The Church is a surrogate of the heavenly Church of the Firstborn. The

authorities who preside in the Church are surrogates of the Lord and his role as governor of the universe. The influence of the Holy Spirit a man enjoys is surrogate of the fulness of light and truth enjoyed by the exalted. The saving ordinances are surrogates of the eternal pronouncements of blessings in the eternal world. In short, earthly things are surrogates of an eternal and a future greater reality. Each is of great intrinsic worth, and only as we accord to each that intrinsic worth and order our lives and them in relation to celestial standards can we ever enjoy the eternal and ultimate reality. Those who are damned are those who abuse the intrinsic worth of surrogates here and now in order to satisfy an urge or lust or fear, being unwilling to abide the celestial image given to them in their minds by the power of the Spirit.

### Conclusion and Corollaries

The force of the thesis of this paper should now be manifest as that thesis is restated: *Qualifying for exaltation consists essentially in the proper ordering of symbols.* This means, then, that the essential steps in becoming exalted are (1) ordering our mental symbols to conform to the spiritual realities of the universe, (2) ordering the affairs of our lives in accordance with those mental symbols. We should remember that each thing, event, or person in this world is a symbol or surrogate of an ultimate spiritual reality and that our actions relative to these things demonstrate how we would react in that ultimate spiritual situation. The following corollaries might now be drawn.

(a) It will be noted that the most important element of ordering symbols in the two steps of gaining an exaltation mentioned above are changes of self more than of anything else. We change our world-image as we are taught to understand truth by the Holy Ghost. We change our actions to treat everything and everybody as we should according to the world-image which the Spirit has given us. The ordering of symbols thus consists in ordering the position of the self, each for himself, in relation to all things external. For the concept of self is itself symbol and surrogate as is everything else. My body is surrogate for the resurrected body I shall some day have. My present desires are surrogates for my eternal desires. My thoughts are surrogates for what I shall think in eternity. If I can subject my body, my desires, and my thoughts to the standards of thought and action prescribed by the Lord, I then can be blessed by him. Subordination of the self to the will of God, then, is the particular ordering of symbols which is in my power which will lead to exaltation. Any deviation must lead to damnation. But the Savior has said this more simply; Except ye “become as a little child, ye can in nowise inherit the kingdom of God.” (3 Nephi 11:38.)

(b) Another consequence of our human situation here delineated is the nothingness of man when he pretends to be anything without the help of the Lord. If we are not led by the Spirit, we cannot begin to know whether we have a correct or incorrect idea about things we cannot directly perceive. All human description of the unseen is a guess, "educated" though that guess may be. Men make sufficient errors to convince at least all who try that the theories of men can never be trusted completely. But even if a man learns for himself from the Spirit the true image of the universe, he is yet helpless if he then rejects the guidance of the Spirit in his daily actions. Without the guidance of the Spirit he will not know what to do in all things to be perfect, since light and truth are different things.

Furthermore, we have not in ourselves the power, worlds without end, to change the past, to change the consequences of our evil deeds, that we might stand blameless before a just God. Through the Atonement of Christ and the guidance of the Holy Ghost, we may be saved from the consequences of our mistakes, and we may be led to sin no more. Both of these great values, guidance and forgiveness, depend solely upon the proper relating of our own concept of our self to our concepts and precepts of our Savior and the Holy Ghost. If we pretend to any merit, worth, or intelligence on our own that entitles us either to a necessary claim upon the Savior's atonement or to an ability to dispense even temporarily with the guidance of the Spirit, we have so misordered the symbols that we cannot be made perfect and cannot reach exaltation. Again, the Savior has said this more simply: "Without me ye can do nothing." (John 15:5.)

(c) Heretofore little has been said of scripture, but the place of scripture can now be located within the framework already established. Written scripture is a collection of human symbols which have been ordered in a particular fashion by holy men as they were directed by the Holy Spirit. Contrary to what is often supposed, the purpose of written scripture is not, generally, to make clear and certain to men the ways of the Lord. The scriptures are written in a human vernacular which is not designed for nor capable of expressing spiritual truth with any high degree of accuracy. That fact may be coupled with the fact that there is no such thing as literal interpretation of any human symbol, all meaning being strictly a matter of convention. To these mechanical difficulties we may add the deliberate confusion created by the Lord, "that seeing they may see, and not perceive; and hearing they may hear, and not understand; lest at any time they should be converted, and their sins should be forgiven them." (Mark 4:12.) It is also obvious that the scriptures are not topically organized nor is any pretension to completeness made for any doctrinal question other than the simple message of the fulness of the Gospel as found in the Book of Mormon. These factors surely demonstrate that the scriptures are not intended

to be a clear exposition of the mind and will of the Lord. Compared with the level of communication established in modern scientific discourse, the *human* interpretation of scripture is almost completely blind.

What then is the intended purpose of our scriptures? They are intended to prick the conscience, to excite the curiosity, to stimulate one to search, and to baffle him who seeks for the wrong reason. They are intended as enigmas that must be unraveled by the same power as originally gave them. He who supposes that he can in any way determine the meaning of any scripture without the explicit guidance of the Holy Ghost, however literal or historic the reference may appear, has not yet learned the answer to the most basic of all religious questions: "Can a man by searching find out God?"

All who have the enlightenment of the Holy Ghost regarding the meaning of any passage of scripture are of one mind with the Lord, with the Lord's appointed prophets, and with all others who enjoy the guidance of the Spirit. The scriptures, are, then, a symbolic enticement to learn of the things of God and at the same time a barricade to the learning of spiritual truth. They are a blessing to humble men who seek true wisdom and a warning to proud men to humble themselves if they wish to know truth and light instead of the vain imaginings of men. Eternal life is found only in coming personally to the Savior as we heed the living prophets and the voice of the Lord through the Holy Spirit. Hence the Savior's challenge to the mistaken Jew: "Search the Scriptures; for in them ye think ye have eternal life: and they are they which testify of me." (John 5:39.) The Jews thought the scriptures would guide them to eternal life. But they didn't understand their own scriptures. If they had, they would have seen that the scriptures point men to Christ, and only in him can any man gain eternal life. Thus the Savior's lament: "And ye will not come to me, that ye might have life." (John 5:40.)

(d) It is important to mention in connection with scripture a didactic symbolism employed by the Lord wherein physically real things on the earth are used to teach men of things they cannot now experience. Brief mention of certain examples of this must suffice. The sacrifice Adam offered was to teach him of the Sacrifice of the Son of God, through which Adam would be saved. The flood which ended the patriarchal world is a symbol of baptism. The ark wherein eight souls were saved by water is a symbol of the saving power of the new and ever-lasting covenant. The rainbow is a symbol of God's forbearance and will not be removed until He is again about to destroy the world. The tower of Babel episode is a symbol of what happens when men attempt to find out God by searching. Light is a symbol of guidance and good; darkness and consequent stumbling of evil. Abraham's attempted sacrifice of Isaac is a symbol of the sacrifice by the Father of his Only Begotten. Moses holding aloft the brazen serpent

was a symbol to Israel that whosoever should have faith to look, to believe on the Savior, should be saved. The rituals of the Law of Moses all were types and shadows, living prophecies of the Atonement. The cross whereon the Savior was crucified is a symbol of the evil of this world. The parables of the Savior were likenesses of things physical to things spiritual. The Liahona is a symbol of the guidance of the Spirit; the Urim and Thummim of the power of Seership. The destructions of the wicked, upheavals of the earth, and subsequent blessings of the righteous in Book of Mormon times were a symbol of the events accompanying the Second Coming of the Savior. Modern temples are symbols of the mountains where the prophets have gone to get away from the world and commune with God, and vice versa. Almost every physical aspect of the temple is symbolic of truths of a spiritual order. The temple ceremonies are highly symbolic but intended to convey important truths for both everyday living and for eternity. Every Gospel ordinance is a symbol: baptism, of death and burial, of cleansing, of rebirth; confirmation, of receiving the Holy Ghost; anointing with oil, of receiving the blessings of the Lord; shaking the dust off shoes, of leaving a witness; the emblems of the sacrament, of the body and blood of the Savior; our reaching out to partake of the sacrament, of our voluntary promise to obey God in all things. Obviously, this list could be extended almost indefinitely. The point is this: the Lord employs every opportunity to use physical things to teach us things spiritual. As we receive this teaching under the influence of the Holy Ghost, we are given an understanding of the truth sufficient for our salvation. If, after all this, we will not accept of the ways of the Lord, it is to our own account. After these many witnesses we cannot stand blameless.

Suffice it to say in conclusion that symbols are at once the key to our exaltation and the lock that damns us. Only as we are honest in heart and hunger and thirst after righteousness do they become the means for our blessing which our Lord intends.

---

Dr. Riddle, professor of philosophy, is chairman of the Department of Graduate Studies in Religious Instruction at Brigham Young University.