

Christmas Symbols

The Christmas season has come once again. It is filled with a plethora of symbols, activities and customs that often blur why this is a Christian holiday. Originally, it had its roots in the date that ended a Roman festival week called Saturnalia. That day honored the rebirth of the sun god Apollo.

Though having true pagan origins, the centuries have nearly obliterated those ancient mythical traditions. The Christianized version has weathered time, and the Christocentric theme nestled in a manger is what Christmas has ideally come to be all about.

This holiday, however, is being secularized. In recent years anti-Christian activists have even pummeled the nativity message. As Revisionism brought Christian “meaning” to many pagan symbols, today political activists are rapidly removing Christian symbols from public display. Many wonderful Christian images remain attached to this holiday, though often seen as secular.

Can one glean important Christian truths out of this season’s complex icons, festivities and symbols? If one wants to. Some reject this holiday because of its origins, others because Jesus was born earlier in the fall. But for most Christians it exists today because of Jesus’ advent. That can open the door to visit the meaning of many rich Christian traditions. Many symbols used at Christmas even point to why Jesus came to earth – appealing to the great theme of redemption. These, in turn, shine new light on His pending second advent. Let’s see what we can discover spiritually from a few of the icons of Christmas.

The Star

The star of Bethlehem was a sign that the promised Messiah had come. It symbolized fulfillment of God’s promise.

The early Babylonians, Egyptians, Chinese and Jews all had stars important to their religious experience. The Christmas tree star reminds us of the heavenly body that guided those pagan biblical scholars from the “east” to find Jesus. It was their ultimate light and guide.

Jesus called Himself the “Bright and Morning Star” (Revelation 22:16). He even promises to give the Morning Star to those who overcome (Revelation 2:26-28). That means eternal fellowship with Him.

Balaam prophesied: “I shall see him, but not now: I shall behold him, but not nigh: there shall come a Star out of Jacob, and a Sceptre shall rise out of Israel” (Numbers 24:17). The Christmas star draws our attention to Jesus, the “light of the world” (John 8:12, 9:5). It assures us that another promise will soon be filled – His second advent. The message of the star helps us to prepare to meet Him.

The Color Red

This is the predominant Christmas color, which symbolizes the blood Jesus shed for us. When His blood poured from that body, He gave His life to make it possible for us to have eternal life.

The richness of the color of red, its vivid deep and intense hue represents the greatest sacrifice ever made in the universe. God's eternal gift to mankind – Jesus – forever linked Him to humanity. Red reminds us of that amazing bond.

The Green Color

This is the second color of Christmas as seen in the tree. It is a background for the red. The evergreen tree remains that color all year, inviting us to think of eternal life He offers to all because of His spilt blood.

During the Roman festival of Santurnalia trees were decorated with candles. Later, the Germans had a wooden-shaped pyramid structure decorated with evergreen boughs. That "tree" was the focal point of their celebration. It was decorated behind closed doors and presented on Christmas eve to the family. That symbolized the moment when everything came alive at the birth of Jesus. In America the enduring tree represents His eternal gift of life to mankind. The gifts under the tree are tokens of His gift to us.

The needles point heavenward, representing to many the prayers of each individual.

The Bell

Picture the Shepherd leaving the ninety and nine in search of that one lost sheep. The bell symbolizes the cry of all lost sinners. The Shepherd finds the missing "one" by its sound. The plaintive peal calls the Rescuer to its side.

Over time churches added bells in a tower structure (~400 A.D.) to call people together to the place of worship. It now seasonally represents a time of peace and unity when all are called together.

This season reminds us of another bell scene. In ancient Israel Aaron the High Priest was to wear golden bells alternating with various hued pomegranates on the hem of his garment. As he moved into the Most Holy Place the sound of the bells was an element of security "that he may not die" (Exodus 28:31-35, 39:26). They announced to the waiting congregation that their cleansing and purification was safely moving forward.

The saints will hear similar bells on the garment of Jesus, our High Priest, at the time of their final deliverance. When we hear the bells, we know our Deliverer is about to come.

"Then I saw the four Angels cease to hold the four winds. And I saw famine, pestilence and sword, nation rose against nation, and the whole world was in confusion. Then we cried to God for deliverance day and night till we began to hear the bells on Jesus' garment. And I saw Jesus rise up in the Holiest, and as he came out we heard the tinkling of bells, and knew our

High Priest was coming out. Then we heard the voice of God which shook the heavens and earth, and gave the 144,000 the day and hour of Jesus' coming. Then the saints were free, united and full of the glory of God, for he had turned their captivity. And I saw a flaming cloud come where Jesus stood and he laid off his priestly garment and put on his kingly robe, took his place on the cloud which carried him to the east where it first appeared to the saints on earth, a small black cloud, which was the sign of the Son of Man."[1]

Candles

Used in the past on trees and now replaced by strings of lights, they draw upon the light from that ancient Bethlehem star; they represent the Savior – the “light of the world,” which brings us cheer and hope.

The Poinsettia

This plant is native to Mexico. It was named after America's first ambassador to Mexico, Joel Pointsett. The Mexicans thought the red top leaves looked like the star of Bethlehem. Thus, it became the traditional Christmas flower.

The Holly Leaf

The Romans gave gifts of holly to their friends during Saturnalia as “good luck” charms and protection against evil.

This evergreen leaf later represented immortality to Christians. The thorns of each leaf symbolize the crown of thorns worn by our Savior, and the red berries, the blood shed by Jesus to bring life to us.

The Bow

Often put on top of a tree, but usually part of gift wrappings, the bow ties us all together in bonds of good will towards each other. That is the message of love and unity that Jesus brings to everyone. The advent is especially represented by a red bow when a holy union occurs through the blood of the Lamb.

The Cane

This typifies the Shepherd's crook on his staff, which helps to bring back the strayed sheep into the fold. The first people to hear of Christ's birth were shepherds watching their flocks at night (Luke 2:8-20).

Those men became symbols of Jesus' care and protection. He later called Himself the Good Shepherd who gave His life for His sheep (John 10:11) and who knew His sheep (John 10:14). The staff of truth helps prevent His followers from wandering away.

The red stripes were not added to candy canes in America (a tradition started by a German choirmaster in the 1670's) until 1900. Then three small strips symbolized the stripes of Jesus,

which heals us (Isaiah 53:5, I Peter 2:24). A fourth wide stripe represented the blood Jesus shed on Calvary's tree (Isaiah 53:5, Matthew 27:32-50).

Peppermint was later added to the candy to represent purging and purification, which Christ's blood does when cleansing us from sin.

Frankincense

This was one of the Magi's gifts (Matthew 2:11) to baby Jesus. Isaiah prophesied that gold and frankincense would be brought by the Gentiles to honor the heavenly king (Isaiah 60:6).

Frankincense was the purest of incense. It burns with a white smoke, representing Christ's righteousness. It was a major commodity in Christ's day. In the Roman Empire it was considered as valuable as gems or precious metals.

The story of frankincense today symbolizes the respect and honor we give to Jesus who humbled Himself as a baby 2000 years ago.

Myrrh

This was another gift from the wise men (Matthew 2:11). This aromatic resin was a widely used "perfume" in Bible times. Of the many uses described in the Bible, three relate to Jesus in a special way.

1. It was a costly gift that bestowed deep respect on the recipient. This was the honor given to baby Jesus.
2. It was used to embalm the dead. Nicodemus gave a mixture of myrrh and aloes of about 100 pounds to prepare Jesus' body (John 19:39). This was 100 times the amount normally used. Another gesture of respect.
3. It was used to anoint (Exodus 30:23-32). Mary anointed Jesus' feet with Oil of Myrrh, preparing Him for His death (Luke 7:38-50) and setting Him aside as the Redeemer.

In this season the story of myrrh reminds us of Jesus' life and death – and the hope this brings to the world.

Interestingly, the church is referred to as a mountain of myrrh and frankincense (Song of Solomon 4:6-8).

The Wreath

This illustrates the eternal circle of love that came to us through Jesus. Its greenery exudes life in the middle of winter.

Snow

This is often associated with Christmas because in December much of the nation is blanketed with these beautiful crystals. The raiment of the transfigured Christ was noted to be as white as snow (Matthew 28:3) – as was God the Father’s garment (Daniel 7:9). Snow has many meanings in Scripture. Its greatest message is “purity,” “without sin” (Psalm 51-7, Isaiah 1:18); totally clean (Ezekiel 36:26).

Christmas – a holy day? No. A day to think of holy things? Yes. So many reminders of all that Jesus stands for from a baby to a king, Christmas has something for every penetrating thinker pertaining to our precious Savior!

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Reference:

[1] Harmon [White], Ellen G.; *The Day Star*, March 14, 1846.