

Kathy Hillman: Symbols: Representing, remembering, reflecting whose we are

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When our older son first learned to talk, he pointed to a neighbor's house and said, "McDona's." We sang "Old MacDonald Had a Farm." Frustrated, he pointed again, adding "widows." Finally, we zeroed in on the arched windows and realized McDonald's "Golden Arches" had outwitted experts who said toddlers can't understand symbols. Marshall wanted a Happy Meal.



Kathy Hillman Symbols have played important roles in our state's history. Contention over the Gonzales "Come and take it" cannon led to the first battle of the Texas Revolution. "Remember the Alamo" became a rallying cry. The Republic under President Mirabeau Lamar adopted the now-familiar Lone Star flag. Texas ranchers still brand livestock to mark legal ownership, just as some believe Jacob did in Genesis 30. My mother prized her handmade boots displaying her grandfather Crawford Mitchell's "7" brand.

Today's marketing and advertising experts extol the virtues of branding. Universities and pro sports teams trademark their mascots and lucratively

license their names and colors in special designs. Businesses choose distinctive logos. Marshall, Michael and Holly played “find the symbol” games on road trips. Now our grandchildren download apps such as “Guess the Brand” and “Logo Quiz.”



Conducting the Lord's Supper in the 1950s. (Photo courtesy of the Southern Baptist Historical Library and Archives) Even churches understand the value of symbols and branding. A friend recently chuckled over an email, “All Sunday school workers and adult Sunday school members need to wear standardized name tags branded for our church.” She wondered if competition had erupted over elaborate name tags or if Marketing 101 had reached her congregation.

Continuing debate over flying the Confederate flag demonstrates how

polarizing but also how potent symbols can be. They are not inconsequential. They represent abstract ideas, encourage remembrance and reflect feelings about a time or experience—positive or negative.

As Christians, we openly wear and display crosses, but God also calls us to be positive images for him. The Apostle Paul said we are letters from Christ “written not with ink but with the Spirit of the living God, not on tablets of stone but on tablets of human hearts” (2 Corinthians 3:3).



Kathy Hillman’s mother’s hand-made boots under her grandfather Crawford Thomas Mitchell’s portrait. The “7” was his brand. (Kathy Hillman Photo)As Baptists, we claim two powerful symbols as part of our distinctives—believer’s baptism and the Lord’s Supper. Some call them church ordinances, because Scripture orders or commands them. In the Great Commission, our Savior tells us, “Go and make disciples of all nations, baptizing them in the name of the Father and of the Son and of the Holy Spirit” (Matthew 28:19). The Message uses the words, “marking them by baptism.”

At that first Lord's Supper, Jesus said, "Do this in remembrance of me" (Luke 22:19). Paul says Jesus said, "Do this, whenever you drink it, in remembrance of me" (1 Corinthians 11:25). Although we consider the two ordinances symbolically, we should conduct them carefully according to Scripture.

Baptism symbolizes the death, burial and resurrection of Jesus, and through our faith, we have passed from death to life. Baptism doesn't save us, and no one can follow Christ for us. Therefore, we reserve baptism only for believers. Early Baptists frequently faced persecution for refusing to baptize their babies, and some were called Anabaptists because they re-baptized adults.



Paisano president Levi Price conducts a baptism at Paisano Baptist Encampment. (Kathy Hillman Photo) Baptists distinctively believe only total immersion adequately symbolizes this death, burial and resurrection. Paul writes, "When we are lowered into the water, it is like the burial of Jesus; when we are raised up

out of the water, it is like the resurrection of Jesus. Each of us is raised into a light-filled world by our Father” (Romans 6:3-5).

The Gospels describe the Lord’s Supper or Jesus’ last meal with his disciples in Matthew 26:17-30; Mark 14:22-26; and Luke 22:14-20. Christ used bread to symbolize his body and “fruit of the vine” his blood. They didn’t become his body and blood then, and Baptists don’t believe they ever do. Instead, we use the ordinance to remember his sacrifice, to rest assured of his presence and to reflect on his promised return.

Yes, like baptism and the Lord’s Supper, symbols represent ideas and beliefs. They help us remember the past and offer inspiration for the future. They are reflections. As Christians, we are God’s most powerful symbol, individually and collectively as the church. We are his letters. Therefore, every day as we live in this world, we remember our salvation, represent our Savior, and reflect whose we are.



At Texas Baptists’ 2015 annual meeting, we’ll feature Baptist distinctives, including baptism and the Lord’s Supper, using the theme “Deep Roots ... Living Legacy.” Plan to join us Nov. 8-10 in Frisco.

Kathy Hillman is president of the Baptist General Convention of Texas. She also is director of Baptist collections, library advancement and the Keston Center for Religion, Politics and Society at Baylor University.