

All Signs Point to Jesus

Semiotics in Service to Christ

Introduction

Tim Tebow kneels before a football game begins. So does Colin Kaepernick. So do any number of players when the coach is giving them instruction. So do you when you come to the Lord's table, and perhaps at the side of your bed in prayer. Roughly speaking, these are five very similar actions, conveying five distinct meanings.

Similarly, you may say, "I love pizza," "I love my wife," "I love my dog," "We made love," and "I love God." Here the same vocable is used in five sentences. In each case the sign "love" has a distinct meaning. I shudder to think that you would confuse your wife with a piece of pizza. How is it that we are not totally confused, but instead are able to extract reasonably precise meanings from these ten signs? The answer is that, while we may not know it, each of us is well practiced in semiotics.

In this brief essay I hope to convince you that a study of semiotics can be beneficial to your proclamation of the Gospel, not only for preaching, but also for the conduct of the divine service.

I. A Brief Introduction to Semiotics

A. Definition

Built on the Greek word, σημεῖον, (sign), Hippocrates seems to have given us the first recorded use of the concept of semiotics. He thought of it as a branch of medicine. It was important to be able to interpret the signs, (today we would say, symptoms), of each disease. Aristotle used the word in the same way.

John Locke turned the term in a different direction when in his 1689 "Essay Concerning Human Understanding," he proposed importing the word to help philosophers, working in the area of communication, to understand the relationship between a sign and what it meant.

It was not until the dawn of the twentieth century that two men, working independently, greatly expanded this field of study. Having begun their studies from two unique points of view they spawned two camps that form a breach in the heart of semiotics to this day. This breach has made the definition of semiotics somewhat difficult.

The camp that follows Ferdinand de Saussure (d. 1913) would prefer to think of semiotics as the study of the development of meaning through the use of signs.

The camp that follows Charles Peirce (d. 1914) would be more inclined to agree that semiotics is the study of signs and symbols and their use or interpretation.

B. Two Semiotic Camps

1. Ferdinand de Saussure was a Swiss linguist who taught for most of his career at the University of Geneva. He influenced the linguistic field not through books, (he did not publish), but through his students and the notes they compiled from his classes, and published. Saussure approached semiotics as a comprehensive study of linguistics.

Saussure conceived of semiotics as a way to study the structure of language, in order to understand how human beings create meaning. His devotion to linguistics brought him to develop a two part method of study. Language develops meaning through the use of the “signifier” and the “signified.” The signifier is the form that the sign takes, (in his use predominantly letters and words, etc.). The signified is the image, concept, or thought that comes to mind when a human being views, or hears the signifier. (Fig. 1)

Saussure insisted on the arbitrariness of the signifier in relation to the signified. He means there is no reasonable connection between the signifier of the letter “t” and the sound that it signifies. The signifier is, in this way, arbitrary to the signified. Likewise, there is no reasonable connection between the signifier “tree” and the signified that the word brings to mind. Human beings have developed meaning, over time, by consistently, and in community, using signifiers for the signified. The use of a signified for the sake of meaning is by convention. Humans must simply memorize the arbitrary signifiers in order to convey meaning to fellow human beings.

This radical two part conception of linguistics led Saussure to deny any meaningful connection between the signifier and the referent or object that it may represent. In other words, while Saussure would not deny the existence of the object, for example, a tree, he would say that it could have no meaning unless it was represented by a signifier.

Consequently, Saussure is famous for holding that the sign creates meaning, or more bluntly, that there is no meaning apart from the sign. Further, he would say, that the fact that each of you most likely has a different image in your mind when I say the word “tree,” is further proof of the arbitrary relation between the signifier and the signified. In this way Saussure laid the foundation for the current notion that each human creates his own reality through the development of meaning when using signs. The Saussure camp of semiotics may be characterized as “idealism” because of its denial of any reasonable connection between an object and its signifier. Or put another way, an object; a tree, a house, a car has no meaning until a human being creates meaning through the use of a sign.

2. Charles Peirce, the other seminal figure in this field of study, was a prolific thinker and writer, whose work for the U.S. Coast and Geodetic Survey, appears to have been simply a means to keep the body alive while he pursued the life of the mind. He conceived of most of his work to be covered by the general study of logic. Thus the study of signs was understood by him to be a branch of logic. Often called the father of American pragmatism, Peirce was an independent thinker who was interested in presenting a working theory of semiotics.

With regard to semiotics, Peirce may be termed a realist in the sense that he argued that the object, or the thing being signified had an independent existence apart from its signification. In place of Saussure’s two part understanding of the semiotic process, Peirce proposed three parts: the object, (subject of the sign) the representamen, (the sign) and interpretant, (how it is interpreted). (Fig. 2)

In fact, his major contribution to semiotics is his characterization of the relation between the object and the sign used to represent it. These relations, characterized in what follows, are never absolute. They exist in tension with each other. So it is best not to think of these categories as a spectrum, but perhaps as a triangle. (Fig. 3)

Peirce summarized sign relations in the following three categories. Within the “symbolic” category are those signs that have no resemblance or direct physical connection to the object. The interpretation of these signs is solely a matter of convention. The interpreters must learn

and agree to the use of such signs. Letters, words, sentences, punctuation marks, and numbers are examples of symbolic signs.

Within the “iconic” category are those signs that have some resemblance to or are an imitation of the object with regard to appearance, sound, feeling, taste, or smell. The interpreter of such signs can find some clue to interpretation in this resemblance. Portraits, cartoons, metaphors, sound effects, and imitative gestures are examples of iconic signs.

Within the “indexical” category are those signs that have a direct, physical or causal connection with the object. Here the interpreter is more easily able to infer that, for example, a footprint is a sign that someone has walked here, a runny nose is a sign of a cold, a knock on the door is a sign that someone wants attention, etc.

Both camps have something to teach us about communication. Peirce’s analysis of semiotics is highly practical. His categories of signs help us realize that care must be taken to use just the right sign to convey the proper message. Saussure, on the other hand, helps us to realize that in many cases we are inventing meaning that must be taught to our hearers. Both help us realize the complexities of communication are a significant area of study for the preacher.

C. Analysis of Signs

One of the chief values of a study of semiotics is the insight gained for analyzing our communications. If we agree that every word and every action, and all the words and actions taken together will convey some meaning, it would benefit our proclamation of the Word to analyze what we say and do, why we say and do it, and how it may be interpreted. There are many tools to help analyze our use of signs. Here are just a few.

1. Paradigmatic analysis- This type of analysis asks what signs are being used, why, and what other signs might be available for the same or similar message. A paradigmatic analysis of the signs that we use in all our communications of the Gospel would be helpful to the Pastor.

For example, if you wanted to convey a message of a warm, loving, protective relationship with God you may choose to use the “sign” father. Given its use in the Scripture that is a reasonable choice, but it should not be taken for granted. There may be a hearer whose only experience with the “sign” father is a vile abusive character. Despite her intellectual understanding of the convention of language involved in the word father, her emotional reaction is negative. This is not a matter of theology. It is a matter of semiotics. When preaching the Gospel our choice of signs is more significant than in our daily conversation.

Similarly, the Pastor may ask himself about the meaning of the physical signs he uses. Will everyone in the congregation understand the sign of the cross? How is the sign of reading the Gospel from a different place than the other two lessons are read to be interpreted? What does it mean to have a band in front of the altar? What does it mean if you leave the pulpit during your sermon? What does chanting signify? How is a female reading the lessons to be interpreted? The list, you may gather, is long. I emphasize I am asking a semiotic, not a theological question. The sign must be interpreted before we can judge its theological appropriateness.

2. Contextual analysis- All signs contain some ambiguity. Saussure and Peirce might say that this is a function of signification. A sign would destroy itself if it became identical with its object. Christians, however, should also recognize the effects of sin. Our ingrown natures

inhibit excellent communication. Having ears we do not hear, and having eyes we do not see. We are bound by sin to interpret signs from the unique perspective that benefits us.

One of the little recognized forces that limits the ambiguity of signs is context. For example, the Christian kneeling in prayer means something different than the kneeling of Colin Kaepernick at a game. We know this by the context. The Christian who crosses himself at the table means something different than the boxer who crosses himself prior to a match. Even without a conscious effort we use subtle contextual variations to help interpret signs.

How broadly we interpret the context will also benefit our understanding of signs. For example, we may interpret the meaning of the words and sentences of a sermon. We may also interpret the meaning of including a sermon at all. What does making space for a sermon in Divine Service mean? If we do not take the time to teach that the sermon is a sign of a Word-based relation with God, we may bewilder members of our congregations who interpret it as a law-oriented lecture, or an entertainment-oriented routine. Once our people have captured the intended large context, the words and sentences are easier to understand.

In the same way we should take time to interpret the meaning not only of the individual words and actions of the liturgy but also its larger context. What does having a liturgy mean? If we do not take the time to teach that the liturgy is a sign of receiving the gifts of God, we may bewilder members of our congregations who interpret it as bargain-oriented negotiation, or an entertainment-oriented past-time.

Using a sign in an unexpected or unusual context will generally create confusion. What does it mean when Madonna wears a cross during a concert? What does it mean if you use crude language during a sermon? How are jokes in a sermon to be interpreted? How would your people interpret it if you decided to wear jeans and a t-shirt instead of your robe?

Whenever we experience changes in our congregations there may be concomitant changes of the signs we use. When you are new to a congregation you may fall prey to the inappropriate use of certain signs simply through ignorance. If we don't pay careful attention to the context we may not communicate the Gospel as we should.

3.Relational analysis- Peirce's categories of signs may be helpful as we consider the signs we use to express the Gospel. It may help us to consider how closely the sign is related to the object we are seeking to express. In general, iconic or indexical signs are a more transparent, and require less teaching. Symbolic signs carry more ambiguity. Such ambiguity may be effective in expressing divine mystery. For example, a circle or a triangle, as signs of eternity, or of the trinity, respectively, require considerable teaching. The cross, a true icon, requires less teaching.

II. Why You Should Care about Semiotics

Whether through words or actions, smells, sights, sounds, humans are constantly employing signs for the sake of communication. While by no means having a corner on the market, the Word of God is heavily invested in semiotics in a manner that is unique to itself. The Scripture uses signs to point to Jesus.

To open this segment of the discussion let's examine a common function of signs. Imagine you are driving down the highway and you notice a billboard with a large picture of juicy hamburger abundantly dripping with all your favorite condiments. You do not pull over to the

side of the road and attempt to eat the picture. Being trained in semiotics you know that it is only a sign. Unconsciously you also understand that the sign points you to something “more real” than itself. The “real” thing can be found a few miles down the road. This is a common function of signs. A similar case can be made for all other signs. For instance, the sign, the word “love,” functions in the same way. The word “love” is not the object itself. It points you to something that is more real, that is to the ideal of love.

This is how all prophecy works. Jesus says, *“You search the Scriptures because you think that in them you have eternal life; and it is they that bear witness about me...”* (John 5:39)¹ He is saying that everything in the Old Testament is a sign that points to Him. Later on Peter says the same thing, *“To him all the prophets bear witness that everyone who believes in him receives forgiveness of sins through his name,”* (Acts 10:43).

The book of Hebrews seems to suggest that the things of this world, all signs included, are “less real” than the things in heaven, because they are copies or shadows. *“Now if he were on earth, he would not be a priest at all, since there are priests who offer gifts according to the law. They serve a copy and shadow of the heavenly things. For when Moses was about to erect the tent, he was instructed by God, saying, ‘See that you make everything according to the pattern that was shown you on the mountain,’”* (Hebrews 8:4–5). Again, the earthly shadows are not the true form of reality. *“For since the law has but a shadow of the good things to come instead of the true form of these realities, it can never, by the same sacrifices that are continually offered every year, make perfect those who draw near,”* (Hebrews 10:1). Paul picks up the same thought when he points us to the substance that is Christ. *“Therefore let no one pass judgment on you in questions of food and drink, or with regard to a festival or a new moon or a Sabbath. These are a shadow of the things to come, but the substance belongs to Christ,”* (Colossians 2:16–17)

These texts, taken together with the close relationship between Jesus, the Word of God, and all creation that came into existence by His speaking, leads me to posit the radical thesis that all signs point to Jesus. He is the object that is most real. He is the substance that we can see behind every sign. That we don’t always behave in this way leads me to suggest that we ought to invest more energy in thinking about semiotics.

III. Jesus’ use of signs

A. Linguistic signs

Jesus used linguistic signs, that is to say, He spoke in human languages. This is an often overlooked aspect of the incarnation. Jesus used the same letters, words, inflections, etc. that the people around Him were using. That his teachings were recorded in such a way that they are still creating faith today is a miraculous result of God being in the flesh, for us. Jesus was a master semiotician.

This conjures the question of how well God could fit into the strictures of human semiotics. Interpreters from the left of side Christianity will say that Jesus was bound by human language. They may even suggest, regarding a particular passage, that Jesus did not mean the actual words in question but was accommodating Himself to the parameters of common speech. I find the argument that the God who is the Word, who created by the Word, who invented

¹ All Scripture Quotations- [The Holy Bible: English Standard Version](#). (2016). Wheaton, IL: Crossway Bibles.

human speech, (Who taught Adam to speak?), could, or would find Himself bound by anything. It is far more reasonable, from a Scriptural perspective, to consider ourselves bound, especially when we do not understand what He is saying. At the very least we might expect Jesus to be able to use the signs, (words, etc.) of the day in creative and meaningful ways.

B. Physical signs

Jesus also used other, more physical signs. All of His miracles were signs, although for most observers the interpretation would lean heavily on a miraculous connotation. Nonetheless, Jesus use of miracles was designed to point to Him as the only one who could save. Countless signs could be mentioned as attending to the ministry of Jesus; from the shepherds visit to the manger, to the descending dove at His baptism, to His light emanating body at His transfiguration, to spit rubbed on the eyes a blind man, to the tears at the death of Lazarus, to the rolled back stone of his tomb.

C. Parables

One other prominent use of signs ought to be noted about Jesus ministry, that is, His use of the parable. In the broad context a parable is the use of a sign to point to something more real, more substantial. His genius in this genre made people comfortable with complex theological truths. This might be a model for modern day preachers.

D. Texts supporting the thesis

The Greek word, σημειον, appears 77 times in the New Testament. Of those 21 are attributed to the mouth of Jesus. Those 21 incidents seem to represent six different events in the life of Jesus. In Mark 16:17 Jesus promises that “signs” will attend the ministry of those who believe. In John 6:26, He chastises those who followed Him around the lake after the feeding of the five thousand for not even looking for signs, but pursuing a full belly. In John 4:48 He questions the official of Capernaum about his pursuit of signs. We will pass over, in the interest of time, these three events.

The other three require deeper inquiry. Two of these, that may be considered together, are the result of Pharisees, perhaps with ulterior motives, pursuing signs. In Matthew 12:38-41 and then again in Matthew 16:11-4, (Mark 8:11-13, Luke 11:29-32), Jesus responds. In the Matthew 16 passage He reproves them for being able to read the signs of the heavens, (red sky at night, etc.) but not being able to read the signs of the times. He then references the sign of Jonah. In the Luke passage He explains that as Jonah was a sign to the people of Nineveh so He would be to this generation. But in the Matthew 12 passage the sign of Jonah is clearly the resurrection after three days. In either case Jesus is directing the Pharisees, and us, to recognize that the signs of the times are all pointing to Him. He is the substance of all signs.

The other event where Jesus uses the term sign makes the same point. In His discourses on the end times, He wants His hearers to believe that the signs of the times, even those of the end times, all point to Him. One passage may be used to summarize. In Matthew 24:30 Jesus says, *“Then will appear in heaven the sign of the Son of Man, and then all the tribes of the earth will mourn, and they will see the Son of man coming on the clouds of heaven with power and great glory.”* “The sign of the Son of Man,” that is the culmination of all the signs of the end

times, points to Jesus as He returns. I submit that Jesus' use of the word "sign" supports the thesis that all signs point to Him.

IV. The Church's Use of Signs

If it is true that all signs point to Jesus, perhaps the Church can take advantage of the situation. The Church has been given the freedom to use, to invent, and to discard signs to the best advantage of the proclamation of the Gospel. Words and practices come and go. The Gospel remains the same, but Christians will constantly be developing signs to assist and support the Good News of Jesus. This, of course, requires great wisdom. Some signs are enduring, (e.g. the word "righteousness" and the image of the cross). Some signs have fallen out of favor, at least among Lutherans, (e.g. baptism by submersion, the kiss of peace). What would happen if we adopted the attitude that all signs pointed to Jesus? A little interest in the study of semiotics might assist the Church in making a conscious, as opposed to a faddish, decision with respect to the signs that she chooses to use.

A. Linguistic Signs

"Be careful little mouth, what you say..." Although quite law-oriented, this little children's ditty gives good advice. Preachers ought to invest a great deal of care in what they say. The choice of signs you use to point to Jesus is crucial to the meaning you wish to convey.

Every human falls into identifiable patterns of speech; favorite words and phrases. Likewise, we are subject to the influence of faddish language. If these patterns of speech dominate our sermons it might begin to inhibit the hearing of the Gospel. A consciousness of his use of signs can help the Pastor consider fresh ways of speaking about Jesus. For example, we might ask ourselves what is the dominant sign, or image we use of the Christ. I suspect that most sermons, mine included, most often present Jesus as the substitutionary atonement. The Scripture is full of other images that are equally tuned to the presentation of the Gospel: Christ as cleanser, victor, resurrector, recreator, reconciler, Christ as peace, hope, love, life, freedom, joy and so on. The careful use of appropriate signs may help our hearers hear.

B. Physical Signs

Everything that is, and everything that happens during the Divine Service ought to point the participant to Jesus. That includes architecture, furnishings, etc. Architecture and furnishings are too much to handle in this essay. I will focus briefly on the actions of the Pastor.

The body of the Pastor during the Divine Service is a signpost for those who attend. His every position and action can be "interpreted" as a sign. The goal then is to make those signs point to Jesus. In sign-relational terms, these are symbolic, meaning they require substantial teaching. But once they are learned by a congregation they are very helpful in focusing attention on Jesus.

Since most of us inherit the architecture of our building it may take some time to develop meaningful signs that are unique to that building. So we should ask ourselves, where is my body now in relation to the altar, pulpit, font, etc. and why? Again, how am I moving now and why? For example, does the fact that I am outside the chancel prior to the confession point to Jesus, and do my people understand it?

Since the liturgy is designed to point to Jesus many of our actions and positions will remain the same. But once the Pastor begins to explore the use of signs with his people, it is not out of the question for him to move in an unusual way to make a point. For example, how might a Gospel processional focus the attention of the people on Jesus? Our actions are signs that are read by our people.

C. Parables

Look at the world around you. It is full of wondrous, miraculous, beautiful, delicious signs. Every one of them points to Jesus in some way or another. Jesus seems to have been aware of this and used it in His proclamation of the Gospel. I am referring to His use of parables. The parables of Jesus are full of points a comparison, signs, from the everyday world, that lead the hearer to Him.

I confess that this is a great joy of my life. Perhaps sharing that joy with you is one reason for offering this essay. I look at the world and everything I see points me to Jesus. I admit that it takes some care to use that profoundly radical attitude in an appropriate way, but it can be immensely helpful in presenting the Gospel. Each event, each object becomes a sign, that I read for the sake of Jesus. That turns life into a great challenge of semiotic interpretation.

This attitude is greatly beneficial in the presentation of Scriptural truths. It does require work to make sure that the point of comparison that equips the sign is congruent with the Word of God. In addition, care must be taken not to “stretch” the sign to say something that is not readily apparent to the hearer. But when it works, it has extraordinary power to bring the Good News into the lives of your hearers.

Such an attitude is not only helpful for sermon preparation but also for influencing the daily faith life of the people. They live in the world. When you are willing to use something that is common in their lives to point them to Jesus, the “sign” you use may help them for the rest of their lives. Not only that, but they may adopt the attitude and begin to look for signs that point them to Jesus as well.

Conclusion

We live with around 7 billion other sinners, all trying to navigate a marvelously complex world. Sometimes the thought of trying to reach that many people with the Gospel, or even the tiny portion assigned to you, is overwhelming. The rules governing the process of communication easily match the complexity of the surrounding world, to say nothing of the sinner’s resistance to God’s Word. Yet, into this world came that Word of God, to be a sign of hope for the world and for you.

That Word is in your heart and on your lips. But you are not alone in your communication of the Word to the world. Your heavenly Father is constantly blessing you with gifts to inspire your proclamation of the Gospel. He has made you, dear Pastor, a sign to the nations, to express the simple truths, as well as the wonder and the mystery, of the Good News of Jesus Christ.

Saussure



Peirce

