

# *Are images of Christ a violation of the Second Commandment?*

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## **The Son, “being the brightness of His glory, and the express image of His person.” (Heb.1.3a)**

Images of our Saviour abound: in ancient or expensive icons, in modern films, in the home and at the office. They are said to remind us of His presence, His suffering and His character, they teach the unlearned, and provided they are not worshipped with the worship reserved for God, they are harmless. So it is claimed by some Christians from each tradition. But these casual claims deserve closer examination, particularly because they are deeply out of touch primarily with the teaching of the Bible, and secondly also with our historical traditions.

### **What does the second commandment require?**

“Thou shalt not make unto thee any graven image, or any likeness of any thing that is in heaven above, or that is in the earth beneath, or that is in the water under the earth. Thou shalt not bow down thyself to them, nor serve them: for I the Lord thy God am a jealous God, visiting the iniquity of the fathers upon the children unto the third and fourth generation of them that hate me; And shewing mercy unto thousands of them that love me, and keep my commandments.” (Ex:20:4-6) This solemn, and often violated command still stands today. God, in his burning love, is jealously interested in the purity of the worship of His people. Superficially, some will claim, that if an image is made but not worshipped, then it does not break the first part of this command. But any image that purports to represent God, the true God, is a form of idol, whether it is worshipped by all or not. It is still claiming to represent God, to teach us about His nature and His character, to inspire our admiration. So the commandment begins with a strict prohibition not to make any likeness or image, and continues by clarifying that this prohibition applies directly and specifically to images intended to represent the One, Who is alone worthy to require our soul’s hearty adoration. Any image or picture of God is a serious violation of this command.

### **The nature of idolatry**

It is not new to claim that the image itself is not the object of worship, but merely a teaching aid or a stimulus to contemplate the glory of the spiritual reality. It is an argument which the idolatrous Jews of old raised. But is an argument strongly contested by their own holy prophets. Isaiah says by the Spirit, ‘To whom then will ye liken me, or shall I be equal? saith the Holy One.’ How can we make any image that represents God, without insulting and demeaning Him? Without making him immeasurably smaller and meaner than he really is? How can even the greatest artist ever begin to hope to convey a small glimpse of His glory. The very attempt must end in dismal failure. God is

far greater in His Holiness, for more glorious, far more wise and powerful, far more wonderful than we can possibly convey. Similarly, we have an evil and continuous tendency to remove aspects of God that we do not like, and to distort His image and His character according to our own evil imagination. He has chosen to reveal His character through His word, and to ban all lying images - why do we provoke Him to anger?

### **Christ the unique image of God**

It is claimed that Christ, being God and man, may be depicted at least in his humanity \*. But Christ is the perfect image of the invisible God. When Philip asked Him to reveal God, He replied, 'Have I been so long time with you, and yet have you not known me, Philip? he that has seen me has seen the Father'. When Christ appeared in flesh, He received the worship due only to God even whilst He was in the flesh - because He was Son of God incarnate, the fullness of the Godhead dwelling bodily in Him. So to make some likeness of Christ, is to make an image of the express and perfect image of God. Can there be any doubt, that such an image deeply breaches this weighty command? If such an image were accurate and true, it would command our worship. But how can human craftsmanship or human acting convey anything of the glory of the only begotten of the Father, without hopelessly misrepresenting Him, cheapening and defiling our view of Him, distorting Him and degrading His unique Majesty, which is 'full of grace and truth'. Dear friends, it is an insult to Him, however lovingly intended !

### **The alleged benefits of icons**

It is claimed that images are of benefit to the illiterate and ignorant, and teach them things that they could not otherwise learn. Again, this argument is nothing new. But the prophets again strongly oppose it. What does an image teach accurately and properly of God and of Christ? Isaiah's answer is 'wind and confusion' - nothing but mischief, and again Jeremiah says it is a doctrine of vanities, making us more brutish and foolish not less. The Holy Spirit warns us it is profitable not for something or even a little, but 'for nothing'. Images do not guide, in fact they deceive, ultimately they will bring nothing but shame (Isa 41:29, Jer 10:8, Isa 44:10, Hab 2.18). Why not teach the Word of God, instead of wasting time angering God with foolish images, icons and films? It is the Word that is profitable to instruct, reprove, correct and train, not vain images. It is the Word which Satan fears, not idols and icons. It is the Word which generates and inspires faith, by the Holy Spirit, even in the humblest men and women. It is the Word that God promises will bear fruit, not skilful artistry or acting. And it is the Word which cannot be bound, by human chains, not vain and empty workmanship.

### **Historical traditions**

So where did this tradition of icon admiration first come from? Is it inherited from our first fathers? What is our common history ? It is a question that must deeply embarrass those who advocate the use of images. Before the great

contamination of the churches at the time of Emperor Constantine's conversion, there is very little evidence that icons were used at all. On the contrary, Tertullian, Cyprian, Athanasius, Justin the Martyr and almost every early forebear who touches on the question uses these same powerful arguments against idolatry amongst the pagans. These arguments would have been terribly turned back upon them, and their own inconsistency exposed, had their own churches been guilty of making images of God and of Christ. Were images of God prevalent amongst the Jews? - only among those determined to ignore the plainest commands. Were images of Christ honoured after the purification of the church at the Protestant Reformation? No, men, women and even children were cruelly burned and tortured, just as the early martyrs had been, rather than submit to Rome's idolatry.

### **Conclusions**

Christians should shun images of Christ, whether as icons or paintings, statues or films - whether openly worshipped or not. As our beloved John the Apostle implored, 'Little children - keep yourselves from idols!'

*Neither shalt thou bring an abomination into thine house,  
lest thou be a cursed thing like it:  
but thou shalt utterly detest it,  
and thou shalt utterly abhor it;  
for it is a cursed thing.  
Deut. 7.26*

Charles Soper

### Some notable quotes.

Justin Martyr

'And often out of vessels of dishonour, by merely changing the form, and making an image of the requisite shape, they make what they call a god; which we consider not only senseless, but to be even insulting to God, who, having ineffable glory and form, thus gets His name attached to things that are corruptible'

Tertullian

All things, therefore, does human error worship, except the Founder of all Himself. The images of those things are idols; the consecration of the images is idolatry.

Cyprian

Believers, and men who claim for themselves the authority of the Christian name, are not ashamed—are not, I repeat, ashamed to find a defence in the heavenly Scriptures for the vain superstitions associated with the public exhibitions of the heathens, and thus to attribute divine authority to idolatry. For how is it, that what is done by the heathens in honour of any idol is resorted to

in a public show by faithful Christians, and the heathen idolatry is maintained, and the true and divine religion is trampled upon in contempt of God?

Athanasius

Nor have they escaped prophetic censure; for there also is their refutation, where the Spirit says, “they shall be ashamed that have formed a god, and carved all of them that which is vain: and all by whom they were made are dried up: and let the deaf ones among men all assemble and stand up together, and let them be confounded and put to shame together..”

While those who profess to give still deeper and more philosophical reasons than these say, that the reason of idols being prepared and fashioned is for the invocation and manifestation of divine angels and powers, that appearing by these means they may teach men concerning the knowledge of God; and that they serve as letters for men, by referring to which they may learn to apprehend God... Such then is their mythology,—for far be it from us to call it a theology.

The Heidelberg catechism (1563)

Q98. But may not pictures be tolerated in churches as books for the laity? A. No; for we should not be wiser than God, who will not have His people taught by dumb idols, but by the lively preaching of His Word.

Calvin

Augustine also confidently asserts the unlawfulness, not only of worshipping images, but even of erecting any with reference to God. Nor does he advance anything different from what had, many years before, been decreed by the Elibertine council, the 36th chapter of which is as follows, ‘It has been decreed that no pictures be had in the churches, and that which is worshipped or adored be not painted on the walls’.

The Westminster Confession of Faith 1647

The grandfather of all Presbyterian confessions

Chapter 21, from Section 1.

But the acceptable way of worshipping the true God is instituted by himself, and so limited to His own revealed will, that He may not be worshipped according to the imaginations and devices of men, or the suggestions of Satan, under any visible representations or any other way not prescribed in Holy Scripture.

[Comments by the Bible League Quarterly on Mel Gibson's idolatous blasphemy 'The Passion'](#)

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