



## Implications of the Second Commandment

It is foolish and wrong to attempt imaging the unimaginable God. All images will be forced to make use of created elements, and thus they will do injustice to the Creator God who is infinitely greater than all he has made. This truth lies behind the second commandment, which forbids us from making use of graven images in our worship and service of God.

### Pictures of Jesus

But say God Himself were to take on visible flesh, humbling himself to dwell among us as one of us? Would this allow us to make use of images? Would it be wrong to use pictures or sculptures to imagine Jesus in his human nature? Yes, He was and is the second person of the Trinity, but He also was and remains a human being, and His human nature being part of the created order means that it could be visibly portrayed. Those who fellowshiped with him between the time of his birth and ascension were certainly able to see him in a very tangible way.

Granted, this is not a clear-cut issue. But we would do well to consider some points raised by Thomas Watson. 'It is Christ's Godhead, united to His manhood, that makes Him to be Christ; therefore to picture His manhood, when we cannot picture His Godhead, is a sin, because we make Him to be but half Christ — we separate what God has joined, we leave out that which is the chief thing which makes Him to be Christ.'

Any current attempts to picture Christ simply would not do justice to the portrayal of Christ in the Bible. The revelation of God concerning Christ has not been handed down to us in the form of a drawing, a painting, or a statue. Rather, we have the word of God, which is more than adequate to show us Christ. Anything else will inevitably fall short.

### Artistic Value?

Unfortunately though, visual portrayals of God and Christ are rather commonplace and familiar. Who among us has never seen a picture of 'The Creation of Adam', the famous painting by Michelangelo found on the ceiling of the Sistine Chapel?

By the way, this raises a difficult subject: what are we to say about the artistic value of such images? Would we say that they are sinful regardless of their beauty?

Throughout history there have been times of iconoclastic fervour, when many religious images have been destroyed. Take the Reformation, for instance. That period is held in low esteem by some art historians because of the destruction of many artistic treasures of the Catholic church. Some might be inclined to argue that many of the Reformers simply had no appreciation for good art.

Now, it's possible that some of the destroyed images did not actually violate the second commandment. Many works were demolished as a result of anti-Catholic riots, and rioters are not always particular about what they wreck. But it also has to be said that many of the destroyed works did in fact violate the second commandment.

Mind you, let's be clear: we shouldn't advocate either rioting or the destruction of private property that does not belong to us. But that does not prevent us from recognizing that certain artistic pieces are sinful, regardless of their apparent beauty, and are not appropriate in the life of the believer. To

reinforce what we're getting at here, consider the following: would you allow your teenage son to hang a painting of a nude woman on His bedroom wall, simply because of the 'artistic value' inherent in the beauty of the female form? No, you wouldn't, because you know it would violate the seventh commandment. Shouldn't we consider images that violate the second commandment to be just as wrong, if not more so?

## **No Images Here!**

But now, some of you might be thinking that all of this talk about images of God is not particularly relevant for you. The second commandment poses no problem for you. After all, you've never taken all your gold and fashioned it into a golden calf, with the idea that you would use it to worship God, like the ancient Israelites. You don't have pictures of Jesus hanging on your wall, like your Catholic neighbour. 'Those Papists with their statues and their paintings, they may have a problem with the second commandment, but not me.'

But you need to realize that when the second commandment forbids images of God, this is about more than just images. There is a fundamental principle that underlies this commandment, a principle which is very important for all of us to remember.

You see, God is making clear in this commandment that images are not appropriate to use in our worship of God. Implicit in this is the idea that there are right ways and there are wrong ways to worship. And it's up to God to determine which is which. As the Westminster Shorter Catechism puts it in Q. & A. 51, *'What is forbidden in the second commandment? The second commandment forbiddeth the worshipping of God by images, or any other way not appointed in his Word.'*

Not only should we not make images, but we should not use any false means to worship God. And of course, it's the Bible that teaches us about true and false worship, about how and how not to worship God. The Bible contains everything we need to know about how to worship God. And so anything that the Bible does not tell us to do concerning worshipping God is not worth doing. We are talking here about a truth referred to as the regulative principle. It's a very important principle for understanding what Reformed and Presbyterian worship is all about.

It's quite simple: the Bible regulates how we are to worship God. You can't use means to worship God that are not found in Scripture.

Mind you, this does not mean that we can find in the Bible a set order of worship that we are to use in all our worship services for all time. And yet, the regulative principle does require that everything that we do in our worship services must be regulated by the Word of God, not by our thoughts or feelings. You say you have an idea about something we ought to be doing in our worship services? Prove it from the Bible.

True and false worship is not determined by our own feelings and emotions, true worship is not determined by what we think is nice or what we think feels good. True worship is determined by God's Word.

## **Worship and Emotions**

In our day, this truth is largely ignored. Many Christians are completely subjective when it comes to the whole matter of worship. They base their ideas about what is worship on what feels good to them, or even worse, on what they imagine will feel good for outsiders.

Are we so arrogant as to imagine that our feelings can somehow be the arbiter of whether or not what we are doing is worshipping God? Well, having the golden calf felt good, it felt right for many of the people of Israel. Having beautiful images symbolizing God can stir in us a sense of awe. But that doesn't stop the anger of God falling on such wickedness. What we happen to think and what our feelings are, these are not the standard by which we judge worship.

Mind you, reliance on our thoughts and emotions with regard to worship can also be a danger in conservative churches, even where worship innovations are rare. Remember this: how we are moved or not moved is not the determining factor as to whether or not worship has taken place. It is pride in the extreme to think that worship is about our emotions.

Of course, true worship will often have a powerful impact on our emotions. If you are not moved by the consideration of your own guilt, if you are not moved by the proclamation of the gospel of Jesus Christ, if the grace of God does not cause your heart to sing, then you had better check your spiritual pulse.

But our emotions are not our primary focus. They do not set the standard for what worship is. Only the Word of God can do that. He knows better than anyone else who He is and how He is to be worshipped. And He has taught us all we need to know in this matter.

## **Worship Without Images**

If images are off-limits, what are some of the correct methods to use when worshipping and learning about God? Well, as Q. & A. 98 of the Heidelberg Catechism states, *'But may not images be permitted in the churches as teaching aids for the unlearned? No, we shouldn't try to be wiser than God. He wants his people instructed by the living preaching of his Word — not by idols that cannot even talk.'*

God wants His people instructed by the living preaching of His Word. The Bible is not a picture book. God did not cause His revelation to be preserved in pictures. God preserved His written Word. He presents a message that He wants proclaimed. Drawn pictures will always mislead us with regard to who He is. But the verbal statements of His Word will never mislead us. They alone can teach us who He is and how He is to be served. And so it is the verbal message which must go forth and be proclaimed.

Sadly, preaching is often looked down upon, even by many in the Church. They draw a false dichotomy between preaching on the one hand and praise and worship on the other. And some churches will even replace preaching with activities that are never even mentioned in Scripture.

But preaching is what God requires. Preaching is used by God to call His people to Himself. As we read in Romans 10:14 — *'How then will they call on him in whom they have not believed? And how are they to believe in him of whom they have never heard? And how are they to hear without someone preaching?'* And verse 17 — *'So faith comes from hearing, and hearing through the word of Christ.'* Preaching is the primary means by which God's people are brought to a saving faith. Preaching is God calling His people. And God is worshipped when His Word is proclaimed. Of course, there are other elements that are necessary in the worship service. Singing and praying together, the giving of offerings — these are all important parts of true biblical worship. But the preaching is central. The proclaimed Word of God stands as the focal point of our worship together.

May we hate the sin of false worship, using images or anything else not required in the Bible. May we love the true worship God has laid out for us. May it be our joy to worship God as He would be worshipped, according to the second commandment!

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