

“Worshipping the Right God in the Right Way”

Exodus 20:4-6

October 16, 2005

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Exodus 20:1-6 “And God spoke all these words: “I am the LORD your God, who brought you out of Egypt, out of the land of slavery. “You shall have no other gods before me. You shall not make for yourself an idol in the form of anything in heaven above or on the earth beneath or in the waters below. You shall not bow down to them or worship them; for I, the LORD your God, am a jealous God, punishing the children for the sin of the fathers to the third and fourth generation of those who hate me, but showing love to a thousand generations of those who love me and keep my commandments.”

Deuteronomy 4:10-19 Moses said, “Remember the day you stood before the LORD your God at Horeb (Mt. Sinai), when he said to me, “Assemble the people before me to hear my words so that they may learn to revere me as long as they live in the land and may teach them to their children.” ¹¹ You came near and stood at the foot of the mountain while it blazed with fire to the very heavens, with black clouds and deep darkness. ¹² Then the LORD spoke to you out of the fire. You heard the sound of words but saw no form; there was only a voice. ¹³ He declared to you his covenant, the Ten Commandments, which he commanded you to follow and then wrote them on two stone tablets. ¹⁴ And the LORD directed me at that time to teach you the decrees and laws you are to follow in the land that you are crossing the Jordan to possess.

^{DT 4:15} You saw no form of any kind the day the LORD spoke to you at Horeb out of the fire. Therefore watch yourselves very carefully, ¹⁶ so that you do not become corrupt and make for yourselves an idol, an image of any shape, whether formed like a man or a woman, ¹⁷ or like any animal on earth or any bird that flies in the air, ¹⁸ or like any creature that moves along the ground or any fish in the waters below. ¹⁹ And when you look up to the sky and see the sun, the moon and the stars--all the heavenly array--do not be enticed into bowing down to them and worshiping things the LORD your God has apportioned to all the nations under heaven.”

As you think about the décor of this room, you may have noticed:

- We don't have statues of Mary the mother of Jesus or of the Apostles.
- We don't have a large image of Christ on the cross, a crucifix, at the front of the worship center nor smaller crucifixes on other walls.
- We don't have the Stations of the Cross built in.
- We don't invite you to enter the room and genuflect (cross yourself) in the direction of some picture or statue.
- We don't have pictures of godly men or women of the past (sometimes called Saints) to whom we encourage you to pray.
- And we certainly don't have images, carved or pictured, of the sun, moon or stars, of animals real or imagined, or of human-like figures that we say represent God.

Why not? Why don't we use these images and symbols?

But you may also have noticed that:

- We have shown both still and video pictures of the mountains, the seas and the universe around us reminding us of the glory of our God.
- We have shown images of Jesus lying in a manger, of Jesus healing and teaching, of Jesus hanging on the cross, and of the resurrected and ascending Jesus.
- We have imagined and imaged in pictures the prodigal's father embracing his returning son, reminding us of the loving-mercy of our God.
- We have hung tapestries on our walls with the image of a descending dove reminding us of the Holy Spirit who has come to us.
- We have the permanent symbol of a wooden cross reminding us of the basis of our relationship with God.
- We have the cup and plate of the Lord's Supper displayed weekly reminding us of Jesus' sacrifice for us.

Why? Why do we use these images and symbols?

While I **do** think that all the images of the first illustrations I used ought **not** be part of worship, I am **not** going to argue that all **we do** is right!

I approach my subject today with deep humility.

That humility has to do with how much I don't know even after giving this much study, thought and prayer for several weeks.

What I present to you today is my best effort at understanding what God is telling us in his Word about the use of images in worship.

I offer some of it with the authority of Gods' Word but I also offer some of it tentatively, not because God is unclear, but because through the years his church has tended to confuse the issues and because godly men and women have differed greatly on the application to us, God's people.

Some of you might have already thought, "Who cares; these sound like arcane, obscure issues that don't really matter."

"Some people like and maybe need images to aid in their worship while others don't – no big deal!"

"If you like bells and smells or pictures and statues then find churches that use them and enjoy. If not, don't."

It would be easy to be so cavalierly tolerant if it were not for God's word in the 2nd commandment:

Exodus 20:4-6 ""You shall not make for yourself an idol in the form of anything in heaven above or on the earth beneath or in the waters below. ⁵ You shall not bow down to them or worship them; for I, the LORD your God, am a jealous God, punishing the children for the sin of the fathers to the third and fourth generation of those who hate me, ⁶ but showing love to a thousand generations of those who love me and keep my commandments.

It's apparently a "big deal" to God.

- He says "you shall not..."
- And he says that those who do "hate" him.
- And he says the punishment for disobeying extends to generations.

No other commandment spells out such a severe warning.

Again I say, it is apparently very important to God.

So what is he opposed to and why?

That word “idol” in verse 4 is the word for any image whether shaped, sculpted, painted, woven, macraméd, or today photo or videographed that is worshiped.

Now it is quite obvious that God is **not** opposed to the making of all images because he even commands images to be part of the décor of the Tabernacle and Temple.

But verse 5 makes clear that what he opposes are images that we worship – images that we reverence and serve.

In other words the images become forbidden when we worship them.

I will speak more of that later.

Our first inclination upon reading verses 4 and 5 is to think they are simply a fuller explanation of verse 3:

Exodus 20:3 "You shall have no other gods before me.

Exodus 20:4-5 "You shall not make for yourself an idol in the form of anything in heaven above or on the earth beneath or in the waters below. You shall not bow down to them or worship them..."

In other words we are inclined to think that these three verses together forbid the idolatrous practices of the Egyptians and the Amorites of centuries ago and of the Hindus and Animists today.

But through the centuries the Jews and most Protestants have separated verse 3 from verses 4&5 and have seen these as two related but different commandments.

The 1st Commandment prohibits the worship of **the wrong god**, which I addressed two weeks ago.

It prohibits the worship of the Egyptian, Babylonian, Hindu or other gods that people have imagined.

You can see this kind of idol worship today in the temples of India or the Shrines of Japan and now even in the larger cities of our own country.

The 2nd Commandment prohibits **the wrong worship of the one True God**, which was addressed last week and again this week.

Let me illustrate this first of all from the Bible and then in our own day.

Exodus 32:1-6

“When the people saw that Moses was so long in coming down from the mountain, they gathered around Aaron and said, “Come, make us gods who will go before us. As for this fellow Moses who brought us up out of Egypt, we don't know what has happened to him.”

^{EX 32:2} Aaron answered them, “Take off the gold earrings that your wives, your sons and your daughters are wearing, and bring them to me.” ³ So all the people took off their earrings and brought them to Aaron. ⁴ He took what they handed him and made it into an idol cast in the shape of a calf, fashioning it with a tool. Then they said, “These are your gods, O Israel, who brought you up out of Egypt.”

^{EX 32:5} When Aaron saw this, he built an altar in front of the calf and announced, “Tomorrow there will be a festival to the LORD.” ⁶ So the next day the people rose early and sacrificed burnt offerings and presented fellowship offerings. Afterward they sat down to eat and drink and got up to indulge in revelry.

In Exodus 32 the people are not violating the 1st commandment directly. They are violating the 2nd commandment.

In verse 5 Aaron specifically says this is a festival to YHWH.

They made an image to represent their God Jehovah.

They are not worshipping the wrong god; they are worshipping the right God in the wrong way by making an image of him.

Another example is found in 2 Chronicles 33:14-17 where King Manasseh “got rid of the foreign gods and removed the image from the temple of the LORD, as well as all the altars he had built on the temple hill and in Jerusalem; and he threw them out of the city. ¹⁶ Then he restored the altar of the LORD and sacrificed fellowship offerings and thank offerings on it, and told Judah to serve the LORD, the God of Israel. ¹⁷ The people, however, continued to sacrifice at the high places, but only to the LORD their God. (Other examples: 2 Kings 9:30-10:29; Judges 17; Numbers 21:6-9; 2 Kings 18:4 compared to Numbers 21:8-9; 1 Samuel 4:3.)

They believed they were worshipping the true God but they persisted in doing it in the wrong way.

The point I am attempting to make is that the 2nd Commandment is not about worshipping false gods but about worshipping the true God but incorrectly.

See it once again in Deuteronomy 12:30-31 Moses said to the people, "Be careful not to be ensnared by inquiring about their gods, saying, "How do these nations serve their gods? We will do the same." ³¹ **You must not worship the LORD your God in their way.**"

And so God says, Exodus 20:4-5 "You shall not make for yourself an idol in the form of anything in heaven above or on the earth beneath or in the waters below. You shall not bow down to them or worship them..."

Again I can imagine some of you thinking, "We don't do that. We don't set up images of God and bow down to them or worship them."

To that I respond, many who call themselves Christians, do in fact just that.

People will put a statute or picture of Mary or some other saint in their own home or their church and bow to it, pray to it, and expect that by so doing they will more likely receive what they request.

But I also know of people who use an altar in their church, or a favorite picture of Jesus, or a cross as an icon, a physical thing or an image, that somehow brings them closer to God and almost magically makes connection with God more likely.

In our minds, we thoughtlessly invest the place or the image with spiritual power that is God's alone.

We can even turn the Lord's Supper into such an idol, imagining that the bread and wine somehow automatically convey blessing to us.

We begin to treat the objects as if they were God, in form.

Idols or images are thought to be a point of contact with the divine, with God. By being close to the image or holding it, the worshipper hopes to be closer to God.

We can do the same thing without an actual physical image.

There are some who invest a certain liturgy with power to connect them to God.

Their worship has to have the right ritual or the right songs (hymns or choruses). It has to set the right mood.

Even in our kneeling in prayer we can ere by imagining that by the kneeling we are somehow gaining greater acceptability or access to God.

It doesn't mean we shouldn't kneel but that we must not invest kneeling with some automatic power to present us to God.

Likewise with the Apostle's Creed – there's no special power in it and we don't gain merit by saying it.

It is merely a succinct way of stating the fundamental truths on which our faith is based.

Imageless idol-making is therefore very possible.

We can imagine God in ways that are not who he actually is.

We might think of him only as love, as the kindly old man who overlooks all our failings.

Or we may think of him only as stern, fearsome, judgmental, and wrathful.

In these and a thousand other ways we create imageless caricatures of God that are false and we worship and serve those images of him.

When someone says, "I like to think of God as _____," they are shaping God into their preferred image. (Ryken, pre-published Exodus, 576)

We have already seen that God takes this very seriously.

Why?

He tells us: "for I, the LORD your God, am a jealous God"

This jealousy is "the burning passion of his love." (Ryken 569)

This is a positive jealousy, a rightful jealousy.

We belong to God, we are rightly his and for his glory and our good, we are not to belong to another.

It's like the mother's jealous protection of her children or a father's jealous guarding of the home of his family.

It is his love for us that compels him to warn us.

For at least two reasons God is opposed to us worshiping images of him. (J.I. Packer, Knowing God, 40-41)

(1) Images of God **obscure the glory of God**, they don't reveal it. Anytime we try to capture God in an image, we leave out so much that we dishonor him.

Jan Lochman wrote, "God cannot be taken captive. No image and no mental concept can capture him. No cultic (religious) practice and no place of worship can guarantee his presence. No institution or movement possesses him. There are not automatic methods of manipulating him... This commandment counters every attempt to stabilize (or domesticate) the doctrine of God, a constant temptation for all... (but) God is always greater." Lochman , Signposts to Freedom, 48

Aaron's bull that we saw in Exodus 32 may have indicated the strength of YHWH but it said nothing of his moral character.

For example, J.I. Packer wrote, "The pathos of a crucifix obscures the glory of Christ, for it hides the fact of his deity, his victory on the cross, and his present kingdom... The symbol is unworthy most of all because of what it fails to display. And so are all other visible representations of Deity... We should not look to pictures of God to show us his glory and move us to worship; for his glory is precisely what such pictures can never show us." (Packer, Knowing God 40,41)

John Calvin said, "We think it unlawful to make any visible figure as a representation of God, because he has himself forbidden it, and it cannot be done without detracting, in some measure, from his glory."

John Calvin, Institutes 1:10:12

Images of God make him less than he is – they reduce him and demean him.

(2) The second reason God is opposed to worshipping images of him is that images mislead us.

God knows that any image that men make will necessarily be a distortion of who God really is and we will therefore end up trusting and worshipping a caricature instead of reality and that means our faith is in a cartoon not the real thing.

The crucifix has historically encouraged people, as J. I. Packer says it, to “equate devotion with brooding over Christ’s bodily sufferings; it has made people morbid about the spiritual value of physical pain, and it has kept them from knowledge of the risen Savior.” (Packer, 41)

This was one of my concerns with the film, “The Passion of the Christ” by Mel Gibson. It was a crucifix in moving pictures – portraying a very incomplete Jesus.

Again from Packer: If you habitually picture God in your mind in some physical form “you will come to think of him and pray to him, as the image presents him. Thus you will in this sense bow down and worship your image; and to the extent to which the image fails to tell you the truth about God, to that extent you will fail to worship God in truth.” (Packer, 41)

But we crave images.

We say that we are visual culture and we need pictures, images, to help us understand and connect not only with our minds but also with our hearts.

But know that our culture doesn’t “hold a candle” to the visual culture of Moses’ day.

People in that day couldn’t conceive of worship without images. As we have seen the Israelites craved images to aid them in their worship.

In response, God didn’t forbid all images; he just reserved the right to dictate what those images would be.

Throughout the OT God gave images, but only faint and sketchy images to his people:

- in a burning bush,

- in a cloud of fire,
- in a “man” who wrestled with Jacob in the dark,
- in the back of God shown to Moses,
- in one “high and lifted up” on a throne to Isaiah,
- in the Tabernacle and Temple with their very precise sacrifices
- and in the witness of the law and prophets.

Oh, God gave images and I think we can demonstrate that all of these faint images pointed forward to the one true image that was to come.

The 2nd Commandment intended to keep God’s people from creating an incomplete and inaccurate image of God until the true one came.

And then that image came:

- Jesus is that image that God has given – Colossians 1:15 “He is **the image** (icon) of the invisible God”
- Hebrews 1:3 “The Son is the radiance of God's glory and **the exact representation** of his being.”
- John 14:9 “Anyone who has seen me **has seen the Father.**”
- John 1:18 “No one has ever seen God, but (the only begotten God - Jesus), who is at the Father's side, **has made him known.**”
- Jesus is the only image that perfectly reveals God.

But even when Jesus came people refused to recognize him as God in the flesh.

One man wrote, “The image God gave of himself in Jesus was an image of wealth hidden in poverty, of majesty hidden in humility, of glory veiled in sin-bearing love, of righteousness hidden in mercy. It was the image of a king in the form of a suffering servant. It was the image of a God who comes into the midst of sinful men to seek and save them – a God who loves and stoops and identifies himself with sinners. But man in his wisdom simply said, How impossible, and how stupid! Men in the presence of Jesus wanted something more divine and sublime.” (Wallace, Ten Commandments, 45)

Today we have the same reaction too often.

We want something more sublime, more beautiful, and more awe-inspiring in our worship.

We want to see God with our eyes.

The British historian, Thomas Carlyle, is reported to have said, “I am only a poor man, but I can say in serious truth that I would give one third of all I possess for a veritable contemporaneous likeness of Christ...Had these carvers of marble chiseled a faithful statue of the Son of Man, as he called Himself, and showed us what manner of man he was like, what his height, what his build, and what the features of his sorrow-marked face were, and what his dress, I, for one, would have thanked the sculptor with the gratitude of my heart for that portrait, as the most precious heirloom of the ages.” Wallace, 34

Carlyle didn’t understand that God **has** faithfully presented himself to us today.

He has done so in his Word – In the faithful witness of the prophets and Apostles in the Old and New Testaments we have the portrait, the image of God, in his Son, that we need.

I think I correctly represent Dr. Carroll from last week when I say, “The Word is worth a thousand pictures.”

But God has also given us something else; he has given us tangible images.

He has also left us the Christ-instituted images of baptism and the Lord’s Supper.

40 years ago Ronald Wallace wrote, “We possess then, the image of God in the church today, not in pictures or carvings or photographic reproductions, but in the Bible account of historical witnesses, in the preaching that repeats and sets forth their witness, and in the Sacraments. We must remember that the living Christ honors this image with his Presence.” (Wallace, 36)

But today we have the same questions being asked that were asked 1800 years ago – how can we attract and communicate with people who are as visual as people are today – trained by television and movies, etc?

But in our desire to be modern or even postmodern we must be careful.

Again from Wallace, "We must remember that it is easily and fatally possible for the church to be relevant to the modern mind and yet be without God, popular yet without God, solemn and religious without the presence of God. What shall it profit a church if it shall gain the whole world and lose its own soul?"

(Wallace, 48)

So what will we do in our worship together as Southern Gables Church?

How do we apply all of this to our worship?

Let me speak first of permanent images:

We will be very careful not to have any permanent images of God the Father, Son or Holy Spirit on our walls or otherwise displayed.

I think this should extend to paintings or statues of Jesus.

Even though he appeared in human form, all our attempts at imaging him will necessarily be faulty.

I think Dr. Carroll made this point well last Sunday.

(Dr. Danny Carroll R., Sermon on 10/9/05 at SGC)

Jewish scholar, Nahum Sarna, wrote, "In the Israelite view any symbolic representation of God (will) necessarily be both inadequate and a distortion, for an image becomes identified with what it represents and is soon looked upon as the place and presence of the Deity. In the end the image itself will become the locus of reverence and an object of worship, all of which constitutes the complete nullification of the singular essence of Israelite monotheism." (in Ryken 574)

The temptation to confuse that permanent image with the true God is too great. We begin to treat it as if it had spiritual power.

We must avoid that - "You shall not make for yourself an idol in the form of anything in heaven above or on the earth beneath or in the waters below. You shall not bow down to them or worship them."

So what about temporary images – pictures or other images that we show to aid in our worship?

I think likewise we should be very careful even in our temporary, even fleeting, projection of images on our screens; careful not to represent the Father or the Spirit in physical form other than the ways the Bible does.

Now because God chose to present himself in visible form (pillar of fire, clouds, etc) and to represent aspects of his character by the use of metaphors which call forth mental images (father, husband, consuming fire, mother hen, etc), I offer that we may use those pictorial metaphors to illustrate aspects of God's character.

But again, to avoid the slippery slope into worshipping the image rather than God, we will use them only as fleeting pictures and not mount them on our walls or otherwise display them permanently.

But what about pictures of God the Son, Jesus?

It seems that even in representing God the Son in physical form in temporary, fleeting, pictures shown in our classrooms or projected on our screens, we must be careful not to repeatedly stylize him in one way - making him fit our image of what we want him to be instead of who he really is.

What of other pictures in our worship?

Can we show pictures of the galaxy as we sing, "the heavens declare the glory of God?"

While I think we may carefully use such pictures in our worship, we must still closely guard our minds and hearts that we do not drift into investing some image, real or imagined, with what belongs to the invisible God alone.

All of that said, I think we will agree that what we want more than anything else is for our worship to focus on the Image that God has given us of himself – the Lord Jesus Christ.

No, that image is not given to us in sculptures or photographs of him but he is given to us in the words of Scripture and in the sacraments of baptism and the Lord's Supper.

He must be our focus!

We want to worship the true God not some warm fuzzy caricature of him that we have created through pictures, light and sound like some Wizard of Oz.

I close with these words from Ron Wallace, “What matters, then, when a congregation gathers for worship, is not the amount of religious excitement we can create, or the pious devotion we can stimulate by a display of imagery either through eloquence in word, or skill in manipulation, or by the creation of ‘atmosphere’ by music or color (or pictures). What matters is one simple fact, the presence of the merciful God in the midst, through the Holy Spirit, as Jesus Christ incarnate, crucified and risen is set forth and offered to his people... No matter how difficult the situation may be for the church in confronting the (present-day) mind and world, our policy in this matter must be decided not by anxiety but by faith in the Word of God.” (Wallace 48-9)

Other Notes:

350 years ago Thomas Watson wrote, “For anyone to say they make use of an image to put them in mind of God, is as if a woman should say she keeps company with another man to put her in mind of her husband.” (Watson, Ten Commandments, 61)

“We are living in a visual age. Everywhere we go we see images flickering across the screen. Some Christian leaders say that the church needs to adapt by becoming more visual in its presentation of the gospel. Instead of simply talking about God, we need to show people something. But this impulse is idolatrous. In his influential book, Amusing Ourselves to Death, author Neil Postman writes: *In studying the Bible as a young man, I found intimations of the idea that forms of media favor particular kinds of content and therefore are capable of taking command of a culture. I refer specifically to the Decalogue, the Second Commandment which prohibits the Israelite from making concrete images... The God of the Jews was to exist in the Word and through the Word, an unprecedented conception requiring the highest order of abstract thinking. Iconography thus became blasphemy so that a new kind of God could enter the culture. People like ourselves who are in the process of converting their culture from word-centered to image-centered might profit by reflecting on this Mosaic injunction.*” (in Ryken, pre-published manuscript on Exodus, 575)

“We human beings find the meaning for our existence from our Creator-Redeemer and nowhere else. In fact, when we reach out to something else and ask or insist that it grant this basic meaning to our lives, then we have created an idol.” (Earl Palmer, Old Law, New Life, 52)

“God does not prohibit images because he is opposed to art.” In fact God used art in the Temple. “Nor were all depictions of Christ and the apostles forbidden. They were simply not to be used in worship or devotion.” Horton, The Law of Perfect Freedom, 90

It is absurd to bow to an image of God when God is everywhere present.

This Commandment strikes against a desire, or we should say a disease, which is deeply rooted in the human heart, namely, to bring in some aids to the worship of God, beyond those which He has appointed — material aids, things which can be cognized by the senses. Nor is the reason for this far to seek: God is incorporeal (without body), invisible, and can be realized only by a spiritual principle, and that principle being dead in fallen man, he naturally seeks that which accords with his carnality. But how different is it with those who have been quickened by the Holy Spirit. No one who truly knows God as a living reality needs any images to aid his devotions, none who enjoy daily communion with Christ requires any pictures of Him to help him to pray and adore — he conceives of Him by faith and not by fancy. “Thou shalt not make unto thee any graven image or any likeness.” It is a manifest straining of this precept to make it condemn all statuary and paintings: it is not the ingenuity of making but the stupidity in the worshipping of them which is condemned...”

A.W. Pink *Studies in the Scriptures*, Vol. XX., No. 4, April, 1941.

James Durham “When by our worship we tie the presence of the true God to some place, image, statue, or relic, as if they had something in them, or communicated to them, more divine than any other thing; or, as if God heard our prayers better at images, and by them; or, as if there were a more special presence of God there, or a more special dispensation of grace granted by them, as heathens supposed their gods dwelt invisibly in their images, and did answer them there. Now, the supposing that there is any thing, something venerable and worthy of such respect is the ground of all idolatry.

Excerpted from *The Law Unsealed, or a Practical Exposition of the Ten Commandments* (Naphtali Press, 2000) unpublished. The text is based upon the eighth and twelfth editions (Edinburgh, 1735; Edinburgh, 1802). By James Durham. Edited by Chris Coldwell

“What is the reason behind this commandment? The reason is simply, God’s love. God forbids idolatry because He is a jealous God. Wait, isn’t jealousy bad, so then how is this good. In the truest sense of the word, jealous is good. Jealousy is not envy in reality or covetousness. Actually the word zeal better shows what this kind of jealousy is. Jealousy in the pure sense means to guard what is rightfully yours. That is how God feels about His people. He is jealous when He sees you and I in the grip of something or someone else and it makes Him jealous. Whether religious tradition, churchianity, self-worship, material possessions, ideas and opinions, only you know what they are

to you, God is jealous over you because God's commitment to His children is full and total because His love for His children is an exclusive love. God is passionate about you. That is why He is jealous when you are more concerned about what you like and in love with yourself or your possessions or a person or something in this life more than with Him. Human jealousy can be insecurity and possessive, but God's jealousy is pure, holy and righteous, a protective jealousy. It is God's love protecting itself. What kind of husband or wife would not be jealous when seeing their spouse in the arms of another, unless there is no real love? Think about it. You want to protect and keep to yourself that which is yours. (Ryken, pre-published Exodus, 570?)

The punishment is to the 3rd and 4th generation:

Years ago there were two men, Jonathan Edwards and Max Jukes. These two men lived contemporarily and their family history was traced for a certain number of generations. Max was a drunken criminal. Max had 1,026 descendants. 300 were in prison. 190 were prostitutes, and 680 were alcoholics. Jonathan Edwards had 929 descendants by contrast and 430 were ministers of the gospel. 86 university professors, 13 university presidents, 75 wrote good books, 7 elected to congress and 1 a vice-president of the United States. Tell me that generations are not affected by what we do. The father who curses God will produce a son that curses God. A woman who worships herself will produce a daughter who worships herself (from Pastor Art, Houston, TX http://www.hissheep.org/messages/2-worshipping_god_the_wrong_way.html)

“The curse of the Lord righteously rests not only on the person of an impious man, but also on the whole of his family” (Calvin). It is a terrible thing to pass on to children a false conception of God, either by precept or by example. The penalty inflicted corresponds to the crime: it is not only that God punishes the child for the offenses committed by the parents, but that He gives them over unto the same transgressions and then deals with them accordingly, for the example of parents is not sufficient warrant for us to commit sin. A.W. Pink *Studies in the Scriptures*, Vol. XX., No. 4, April, 1941.

We are to bear God's image not create it out of clay, wood or celluloid. Christopher Wright "The only legitimate image of God... is the image of God created in his own likeness – the living, thinking, working, speaking, breathing, relating human being (not even a stone statue will do, but only the human person.)" We are not allowed to make God's image but only to be God's image." (in Ryken 576)

Westminster Larger Catechism:

Q108 What are the duties of the 2nd Commandment?

"The duties of the 2nd Commandment are, the receiving, observing, and keeping pure and entire, all such religious worship and ordinances as God has instituted in his Word; particularly prayer and thanksgiving in the name of Christ; the reading, preaching, and hearing of the Word; the administration and receiving of the sacraments; church government and discipline; the ministry and maintenance thereof; religious fasting; swearing by the name of God, and vowing unto him: as also the disapproving, detesting, opposing all false worship; and according to each one's place and calling, removing it, and all monuments of idolatry."

Q109 What are the sins forbidden in the 2nd Commandment?

"The sins forbidden in the 2nd Commandment are, all devising, counseling, commanding, using and anywise approving, any religious worship not instituted by God Himself; tolerating a false religion; the making any representation of God, of all or of any of the three persons, either inwardly in our mind, or outwardly in any kind of image or likeness of any creature whatsoever; all worshiping of it, or God in it or by it; the making of any representation of feigned deities, and all worship of them, service belonging to them; all superstitious devices, corrupting the worship of God, adding to it, or taking from it, whether invented and taken up of ourselves, or received by tradition from others, though under the title of antiquity, custom, devotion, good intent or any other pretense whatsoever..."

"His precept consists of two parts. The first restrains us from licentiously daring to make God, who is incomprehensible, the subject of our senses or to represent him under any visible form. The second prohibits us from paying religious adoration to any images."

“Whatever visible representations of God are invented by man, are diametrically opposite to his nature, (and by them) true religion is immediately corrupted and adulterated.” John Calvin, Institutes 2:8:17

“In these words (commandment two) God forbids us to attempt a representation of him in any visible figure; and briefly enumerates all the forms by which superstition had already begun to change his truth into a lie.” Institutes 2:8:17 Persians used celestial bodies to represent God; Egyptians used animals and the Greeks used human forms.

“Whence it follows, that whatever statues are erected, or images painted to represent God, thy are only displeasing to him, as being so many insults to the divine majesty.” Institutes 1:11:2

“The Bible dares to speak of God in an unreservedly vivid and graphic way, in narrative terms and therefore, pictorially, even in deliberately anthropomorphic terms. The intention of the text of the Second Commandment cannot be to prohibit us from speaking of God in graphic and even earthy language and imagery.” Lochman, [Signposts to Freedom](#) 46

“We must be careful not to ignore the fact that what the Second Commandment prohibits is not all images and all image-making but only the religious or ideological transfiguration of images and pictures into cultic objects. ‘You shall not bow down to them nor serve them!’” Lochman 47

“What happens in idolatry is that persons or communities reach out toward the created order and project strong expectations and fears that make up the essence of humanness; it is in that sense of incompleteness and in an attempt to fill in the missing whole of that incompleteness that the shadow is projected” instead of waiting on the living God. Palmer [Old Law – New Life](#), 55

“To make a true image of God is impossible. God is a spiritual essence and being a spirit is invisible... There is no depicting the invisible.” (Watson, 60)

Images of the Holy easily become holy images - sacrosanct. My idea of God is not a divine idea. It has to be shattered from time to time.

He shatters it Himself. He is the great iconoclast. Could we not say that this shattering is one of the marks of His presence? C.S. Lewis in A Grief Observed

Roman Catholics (along with Lutherans) divide the commandments differently than do the Jews and the other Reformers of the 16th Century. They include Exodus 20:3-6 as the first commandment and divide what we call the 10th commandment into two about coveting. When they combine verse 4 with verse 3 they make verse 4 part of the prohibition of false gods. At the council of Trent in the 1500s the Roman Catholic catechism omitted the 2nd commandment entirely. The Eastern Orthodox church kept the words but narrowly defined them as referring only to carved (stone) images thus permitting the worship of icons (flat pictures).

Douma The Ten Comandments 62 footnote)

Physical images – idolatry
Mental images – ideology

Consistent with the Second Council of Nicaea (787) and the Council of Trent (1563), in the Constitution on the Sacred Liturgy, the Second Vatican Council in 1963 declared “The practice of placing sacred images in churches so that they may be venerated by the faithful is to be maintained.” Douma The Ten Comandments , 64-5)

That decree remains in force today in Roman Catholicism.

People try to make a distinction between veneration and worship but such a distinction (if a distinction exists) breaks down in practice. Images, statues, pilgrimages are still done with the idea they hold special power providing access to heavenly blessing. That is idolatry and a breaking of the 2nd commandment. Douma

For centuries some theologians tried to justify images by calling them the “books for the laity” meaning that because so many were illiterate they needed pictures to assist them. Certainly children can be assisted with understanding by the use of pictures but we must not consign adults to illiteracy. Christianity, like the Judaism from which it grew, is based on Word not on picture. (Douma)

Art, even religious art, surely has its place but we must still live within the bounds of the 2nd Commandment to avoid imaging God in physical form.

“What the image always wants to do in worship is to distract us from hearing the Word. The crucifix, the icon, the drama, the dance, - these things are not aids to worship but make true worship all but impossible. In a visual age we need to be all the more careful not to look at the image but to listen to the Word.” (Ryken 575)

Doesn't God here invite me to create a mental picture of the Son and of the Father (though very limited of the father in chap 4)?

Revelation 1:12-16 “I turned around to see the voice that was speaking to me. And when I turned I saw seven golden lampstands, ¹³ and among the lampstands was someone "like a son of man," dressed in a robe reaching down to his feet and with a golden sash around his chest. ¹⁴ His head and hair were white like wool, as white as snow, and his eyes were like blazing fire. ¹⁵ His feet were like bronze glowing in a furnace, and his voice was like the sound of rushing waters. ¹⁶ In his right hand he held seven stars, and out of his mouth came a sharp double-edged sword. His face was like the sun shining in all its brilliance.

Revelation 4:1-3 “After this I looked, and there before me was a door standing open in heaven. And the voice I had first heard speaking to me like a trumpet said, "Come up here, and I will show you what must take place after this." ² At once I was in the Spirit, and there before me was a throne in heaven with someone sitting on it. ³ And the one who sat there had the appearance of jasper and carnelian. A rainbow, resembling an emerald, encircled the throne.

Revelation 19:11-16 “I saw heaven standing open and there before me was a white horse, whose rider is called Faithful and True. With justice he judges and makes war. ¹² His eyes are like blazing fire, and on his head are many crowns. He has a name written on him that no one knows but he himself. ¹³ He is dressed in a robe dipped in blood, and his name is the Word of God. ¹⁴ The armies of heaven were following him, riding on white horses and dressed in fine linen, white and clean. ¹⁵ Out of his mouth comes a sharp sword with which to strike down the nations. "He will rule them with an iron scepter." He treads the winepress of the fury of the wrath of God Almighty. ¹⁶ On

his robe and on his thigh he has this name written: KING OF KINGS AND LORD OF LORDS.

The remaining comments are quotes of or thoughts stimulated by Ronald Wallace The Ten Commandments

God uses words to communicate himself to us.

The Bible is still the main way that God shows himself to us and shows us how to relate to him.

But God also knows that images are very important to us. He made us in the way that images impress us more quickly even than words. God does not limit himself only to words in communicating to us; he also uses images.

BUT God reserves the right to determine what those images will be that he chooses to communicate himself to us.

“God reserves for Himself along the right to express and produce the images of himself before which men must worship, through which men must conceive him, to which men must respond in obedience to his own initiative in seeking fellowship with them.” Wallace 30

Jesus is that image that God has given – Colossians 1:15 “He is the image (icon) of the invisible God”

Hebrews 1:3 “The Son is the radiance of God's glory and the exact representation of his being.”

John 14:9 “Anyone who has seen me has seen the Father.”

John 1:18 “No one has ever seen God, but God the One and Only (the only begotten God), who is at the Father's side, has made him known.

Jesus is the only image that perfectly reveals God.

“Then all of our imagery of thought and symbol must serve this image as did that of the Old Testament.” Wallace 33

We can make a strong case that all God-sanctioned imagery including sacrifices and the Tabernacle and Temple pointed to Christ.

But God **has** faithfully presented himself to us today.

He has done so in his Word – In the faithful witness of the prophets and Apostles we have the portrait of God, in his Son, that we need.

“All of the images and words of God in the Old Testament were meant to give a faint sketchy outline, such as would prepare men for the ultimate revelation of the true image, and would help them and us to understand and interpret it. The New Testament is simply the

setting forth of the image as the Apostles saw it, interpreted in the light of the Old Testament and as they want us to see it today.”
(Wallace, 35)

But God has left us more than a book. He has also left us the Christ-instituted images of baptism and the Lord’s Supper.

“We possess then, the image of God in the church today, not in pictures or carvings or photographic reproductions, but in the Bible account of historical witnesses, in the preaching that repeats and sets forth their witness, and in the Sacraments. We must remember that the living Christ honors this image with his Presence.” (Wallace, 36)

Throughout the OT God usually presents himself in voice, in word. Only occasionally he presented himself to people in symbol of cloud, fire, burning bush, or to Isaiah as one seated on a throne high and lifted up.

The Hebrews were different from the religionists around them; the Hebrews were not to make images of their God.

We crave images of God.

The Israelites made a golden calf at Horeb to have an image of God to worship. (Exodus 32)

Jeroboam made two calves one for Bethel and one for Dan to give his people an image of God to worship. (1 Kings 12:28-30)

God knows that any image that men make will necessarily be a distortion of who God really is and men will therefore end up worshipping a caricature instead of reality and that means death rather than life.

Even when Jesus came people refused to recognize him as God in the flesh.

“The image God gave of himself in Jesus was an image of wealth hidden in poverty, of majesty hidden in humility, of glory veiled in sin-bearing love, of righteousness hidden in mercy. It was the image of a king in the form of a suffering servant. It was the image of a God who comes into the midst of sinful men to seek and save them – a God who loves and stoops and identifies himself with sinners. But man in his wisdom simply said, How impossible, and how stupid! Men in the

presence of Jesus wanted something more divine and sublime.”
(Wallace, 45)

Today we have the same reaction too often. We want something more sublime, more beautiful, and more awe-inspiring than the word simply preached and the Sacraments simply administered. We want to see God with our eyes.

Even if OT people were not supposed to make images of God, now that Jesus has come in human form we can use any means available to us to represent him to others.

Within a couple of hundred years of Christ's resurrection the church began using pictures, statues and more to worship God.

“Instead of being content with the Word and Sacraments which were left by Jesus to represent his image and be the means of his presence among people, other ceremonies were invented supplementing and elaborating the Church's ritual. All this was done with the best of intentions in an attempt to satisfy the craving of the people for the sensuous, and to add an attractive element regarded as absent from the simpler Gospel traditions.” (Wallace 47)

The Reformers, seeing the huge abuse of images in contradiction to the 2nd Commandment returned the church to the simplicity of Word and Sacrament.

“To be obedient in the presence and light of Jesus Christ means not only to look at him in order to learn everything we need to know about God from him, but also to refuse to add to his image of God the contributions of our own wisdom and imaginations, which, in face of the real hidden glory of his image could only appear to be empty, ridiculous and untrue. Here we have to bring our minds into obedience in acknowledging the sole glory of God... What is at stake in the question of our obedience or disobedience is the presence of the gracious God in our midst.” He will only be worshipped as he truly is not as we imagine to be. (Wallace, 48)