

The Use of Images in Worship
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From a sermon delivered on October 16, 2005 on the 2nd
Commandment – “Worshipping the Right God in the Right Way”

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

How do we apply all of this (the preceding sermon comments)
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)

The following are responses from two who disagreed with the sermon:

1. Cultural associations with entertainment forms
 - a. Consider that:
 - i. Contemporary American culture is saturated with television and images
 - ii. This entertainment form demands the greatest single area of time spent outside of sleep or work
 - iii. The medium is almost exclusively designed for entertainment or consumeristic ends
 - iv. The Church must always show compassion and understanding in its cultural climate
 - v. The use of images is counterproductive toward true, mature, and maturing worship of our Trinitarian God
 - b. The media of passive viewing, both in still and moving pictures, cannot be separated from its cultural associations with entertainment
 - i. The viewer automatically becomes passive, expecting fun, titillation, and ease
 - ii. This is self-defeating, as the bar is constantly raising itself to match the production quality of the entertainment apparatus as well as the demand for new “programming”
 - c. Consumability of our images vs. permanence of Temple artwork, medieval European sacred art, etc.
 - i. True visual art demands attention, meditation, and a *prima facie* willingness to be changed by the message of the artwork
 - ii. Images shown for seconds at a time using the media of television are not conducive toward the role of genuine art in the Christian’s life. They

can by nature be little more than entertainment or emotive utterances writ large.

2. Limitations inherent in the media themselves

- a. Consider that:
 - i. The Christian faith, its Holy Scriptures, and the Gospel of Christ are based upon truth proclamations and abstract notions
 - ii. The worship of the Church is based upon these notions, namely the character of the Godhead and His mighty saving acts
 - iii. The nature of images severely limits them in their ability to communicate specific and historic truths
 - iv. The spoken Word and carefully enacted Sacraments are able to bear the weight of such communication
 - v. We conclude that the use of images in worship cannot attain the goals of biblical worship, namely to encounter God, praise him for his character and deeds, and submit ourselves to Him
- b. Still pictures: images nearly always lack context, both in reference to the actual world (where is this waterfall? Is this sun rising or setting?), but also theologically (What do these mountains suggest? Majesty? Impermanence of the current created order? Creation's humble place before the Sovereign Creator?)
- c. Video: Lack of context is exacerbated by the ephemeral nature of the image shown: change, movement, experience all trump meditation and interaction

3. Harm to the content of the Word

- a. Consider that:
 - i. Many contemporary evangelicals are biblically illiterate
 - ii. The difficulty to be disciplined in studying, memorizing, and becoming intimately knowledgeable of the Word of God grows with the ubiquity of entertainment
 - iii. The Bible itself uses very specific images and symbols to communicate truths about God
 - iv. These symbols are forsaken for current cultural mores
 - v. Such forsaking maintains the ignorance of God's people of his Word and distances them from its language and message
 - vi. We conclude that images (especially without scriptural context and education establishing such a context) deny the weight and import of images which the Holy Scriptures place upon them
- b. Primary example: nature images
 - i. Scriptural use of "mountain"
 - ii. Cultural assumption – wilderness is the best place to encounter God, unencumbered as it is by human involvement
 1. Rousseau and transcendentalist notion, not the Bible's
 2. Scripture puts forth the city as God's primary place of residence
- c. Images by their nature can only deal with a very limited scope of biblical themes
 - i. Justice, judgment, ethical demands, holiness, transcendence, sovereignty, etc.
 - ii. Images carry cultural (or even individual) referents, rather than biblical ones (barring extensive education of the worshippers)