

## **Images of Christ:**

The 2nd commandment forbids making and worshiping images of God. Jesus is God. Yet, it is not uncommon to find pictures of him in Christian homes, churches, bookstores, illustrated Bibles, Christian magazines. They seem to be everywhere.

So what is wrong with an innocent picture or depiction of the the likeness of baby Jesus in a manger, or a statue of Christ?

Our topic falls within the domain of a larger controversy over the use of religious images in worship, whether they be of God, or saints. Those who oppose the use of images are called Iconoclasts, and those who revere and venerate them are Iconodules.

Iconodules are most prevalent among the Eastern Orthodox where the veneration of images is required, and in Roman Catholicism where the practice is defended and affirmed.

Moses was the first Iconoclast in the Bible. He angrily destroyed the golden calf, grinding it into powder mixed with water, and made the Israelites drink it. Then he instructed the Levites to sweep the camp killing as many men as they could, resulting about 3,000 deaths; a shadow of judgment day.

Iconodules defend their practice of employing the use of

images in worship by appealing to three main arguments.

First, there are occasions in the Bible where representations and symbols are used in worship. For example, cherubim were depicted in the OT temple, and bread and wine are used to symbolize Christ in the NT.

Second, since Christ is the visible human manifestation of God, Iconodules find it appropriate (and some would say necessary) to create icons of him.

For example, in the early church there were heretical sects who denied the humanity of Christ and objected to depictions of him as such on those grounds. The Iconodules reacted by making icons and pictures of Jesus as a man to express their orthodox belief in the real humanity of Christ.

And third, Iconodules distinguish between veneration and adoration, the former being ascribed to the icon, and the latter reserved for God. The venerated object is said to be used as a window through which God is reflected upon and adored.

The veneration of images existed in the religion of emperor worship, in which a bust of the Roman emperor was displayed. The early church was often persecuted for not participating in these idolatrous ceremonies. They retreated into the catacombs where archaeologists have discovered numerous symbols painted on the walls (fish, cross, lamb, dove, fire, bread and wine, etc.), but no pictures intending to portray the likeness of Christ. After

Christianity became the established religion under Constantine the emperor worship stopped, but that old idolatrous mode of worship would continue, only, now with depictions of Christ.

The Iconoclasts oppose the use of icons (a sanctified word for idol) and pictures in worship for several main reasons.

First, because the 2nd commandment forbids the making and worshiping of idols. This was the way Israel's pagan neighbors worshipped their gods, and it was forbidden to ape their method.

Second, since Christ is fully God he must not be pictured. While it is wrong to deny his full humanity like the heretics of the early church, the 2nd commandment applies to Jesus now no less than it did before the incarnation.

Third, the Bible does not distinguish between veneration and worship. It simply forbids the use of idols.

Fourth, Christians worship through the mediation of Christ, the heavenly high priest (Heb. 10:19-21), with the aid of his Word and the Holy Spirit. To suggest the need for an iconic window diminishes the sufficiency of Christ's intercessory work.

More could be said, but this is enough to sketch the general lines of the debate. In short, for the Iconoclast, it all boils down to one thing: the regulative principle. God tells man how to worship. And he has forbidden the use of

idols.

There were two high water marks in church history surrounding this debate. The first was in the 700's, and the debate centered around the doctrine of Christ as it related to the use of images. The controversy then was antagonized by heretical views of Christ, tensions between the Eastern and Western churches, illiteracy, non-Christian philosophy, and even Islamic influence. The Iconodules eventually won. But the Iconoclasts returned during the Reformation with a vengeance, calling for a return to the Bible alone as the sufficient, authoritative rule for faith and practice. Churches were whitewashed, and statues destroyed.

In the same way that the 9th commandment forbids all lying (not just false legal testimony), the 2nd commandment forbids any and all types of man made worship (not just stone idols). For example, in Dt. 12:32, while instructing the Israelites to enforce the 2nd commandment God summarizes it saying: "Whatever I command you, you shall do; you shall not add to nor take away from it."

The 1st commandment says who to worship (God alone) and the 2nd commandment addresses how to worship. We are forbidden to have other gods and forbidden to make other gods. If you do not worship how God says, the danger is that you will not worship who God says. For example, the modern church growth movement has adopted much of its worship practices from the entertainment industry. As a result, worshipers must ask themselves whether they have truly worshipped the true God or simply entertained

themselves.

The 2nd commandment forbids two things: making idols (verse 4) and worshiping them (verse 5). This is really an emphatic way of forbidding the entire complex of idol worship. From beginning to end, you may not make, package, distribute, sell, buy, place on a table, dust off, shine up, bow down before, and worship any idols. Have nothing to do with them. More than that, reject all man made forms of worship.

The 2nd commandment offers one reason for this: namely, because God is a jealous God. The word jealous is used to denote conjugal zeal. If a man were to keep a picture of another woman in his wallet explaining to his wife that it represented her, she would no doubt object, because in reality it is not her, but another woman. In a similar way, we do not make images of God because, in truth, they are not God.

-Pastor Ferry