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THE PROTESTANT FAITH

GOD FORBIDS IMAGES IN WORSHIP

by
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It was reported recently in the press that the recent session of the Vatican Council voted overwhelmingly that images in churches should be moderate in number. It is difficult to see the reason for this vote, for if images are a good thing and helpful to the people, what reason is there for limiting them to what may be described as a moderate number? While on the other hand, if they are a bad thing, they ought not to be there at all, and one image is one too many. It should be remembered that images were a normal adjunct of heathen worship in the Greek and Roman world of our Lord's time. They were regarded as symbols of the gods. No-one, of course, believed they were actually the god who was being worshipped or that the god lived in them, but they represented the gods of the paganism of the time and people honoured the image in the belief that they were honouring the god. However, there were no images, neither pictures nor statues, in the synagogues and the temple of Palestine in which our Lord or His apostles worshipped. No Jew, for example, would have thought of painting a picture of Moses or of carving his statue and putting it in the building where the congregation met for worship, for he regarded all images as forbidden by the second of the Ten Commandments, which says "Thou shalt not make any graven image, thou shalt not bow down nor worship them". The same rule applied in the church buildings of the early Christian church, there were no images or sacred paintings. Heretics were the first to use images and the early Christian writer Irenaeus reproached the Gnostic Carpocratians for possessing pictures of Christ (Haer 1.25.6), but it was not till the fourth or fifth century that images and pictures
began to be introduced into Christian churches. Their introduction coincided with the growth of heathen influence in the church, for at this time large numbers of ill-instructed pagans joined the church, following the example of the conversion of the Roman emperor. The church historian Eusebius writing at that time (in Book 7, chapter 18) affirmed that it was from heathen sources that sacred images began to be introduced into Christianity. They were not introduced without protest. For example we have the well known story of Epiphanius who found a linen cloth hanging in the church door with a painting on it of Christ or some other saint (the bishop could not remember which) but he cut it down as having no rightful place in the church. And Canon 36 of the famous early Church Council of Elvira, held in the fourth century, strictly forbade placing in churches pictures of Christ or the saints. It was not until the eighth century that official church approval was given to sacred paintings in the church, and later still to sculptures. This approval was not obtained without a great deal of strife in the church, and as late as A.D. 794 a synod at Frankfort convened by Charlemagne and attended by bishops from England and the Continent, condemned pictures and images in churches.

However, in spite of this opposition the worship of images continued to increase in the Christian church, growing even more in the East than in the West. Thus the new Schaff-Herzog encyclopaedia (Vol.2 page 454) states that before the Communist revolution the ordinary Russian was in the habit of designating the ikon, that is his sacred picture, as his God. And to the image of the mother of God at Kasan was ascribed Russia's deliverance from Napoleon. The same trust in
Ikons showed itself in the Japanese/Russian war of 1905 while the Iberian ikon of the Virgin was the most celebrated healer of Moscow, and the encyclopaedia said that Russia was richer in wonder working images than Italy and Spain. This was the state of the church in Russia before the Communists came to power.

As we have seen the Bible is emphatic in its frequent prohibition of images and pictures used in religious worship. There is not only the second commandment in Exodus 20 "Thou shalt not make to thyself a graven image, thou shalt not bow down nor worship them", but this same sentiment is repeated frequently, for example, in Deuteronomy 4:15ff "Take ye therefore good heed unto yourselves; for ye saw no manner of form on the day that the Lord spake unto you in Horeb out of the midst of the fire: lest ye corrupt yourselves, and make you a graven image in the form of any figure", and in a verse or two later "Take heed unto yourselves lest ye forget the covenant of the Lord your God which He made with you and make you a graven image in the form of anything which the Lord your God has forbidden you. For the Lord your God is a consuming fire, a jealous God".

These passages are clear in their complete prohibition of the use of images or pictures with regard to the worship of God. On the other hand, the Roman Catholic Church teaches that images are to be worshipped with the same divine honour that we are to worship God. Thus the Council of Trent in Session 25 decreed that "images of Christ, the Virgin Mary, and the other saints are to be retained in churches and that due honour and veneration to be given to them because... the honour which is shown to them is referred to the prototypes which these images represent. It is
in such wise that by the images we kiss and before which we uncover the head and prostrate ourselves, we adore Christ." In this decree the Council is simply following the authority of Thomas Aquinas who in his Summa Theologica question 25 Article 3-4 declared that "the image of Christ claims the same veneration as Christ Himself". Just as Basil of Caesarea centuries before in De Spiritu Spiritu 45 had said "The honour paid to the image passes on to the prototype". This is just the thing which the Scriptures so clearly condemn, to honour God through honouring an image. The reason is that whatever subtle distinctions we may make in our mind it is not long before the image itself is clothed with divine properties and so becomes the substitute for God. Roman Catholics deny that this happens, but it cannot be avoided if you adore an image, and we have a good example of it in a pamphlet entitled "The Miraculous Child of Prague" which is at the present time on sale in Roman Catholic churches in Sydney. In describing this image of the child Jesus in a monastery in Chekoalavakia, the pamphlet speaks in a way which plainly shows that the image itself is thought of as divine. I quote from page 6 "From its beautiful eyes dart sparks of heavenly love, its smiling lips offer us spiritual riches and its beauty conquers all hearts. All who approach the miraculous statue and pray there with confidence receive assistance in danger, as well as in sorrow, aid in poverty", etc, etc, and on page 28 the pamphlet describes how "children came forward and presented to the Lord Jesus gifts in honour of the shepherds and the wise men". This is plain idolatry because Jesus is no longer a little child but the statue of what He once was has become the centre of divine adoration. One such statue in a church is one too many.

There is a reason for the Bible's emphatic and repeated prohibition of images. Firstly, it is a deep seated error of our sinful hearts to wish to make an image of God and so to reduce His divinity to something palpable. St. Paul in Romans chapter 1,
verse 23 speaks of man's refusal to acknowledge God as He is, and the first step in this refusal is the portraying of God's glory by way of an image. This tendency of the rebellious human heart lurks in all of us. That is why the Bible so emphatically warns us to be on our guard. In the early centuries of the church's history there were great convulsions in the attempt to keep Christian worship free from images and again at the time of the Reformation images were once more excluded from reformed churches. But the tendency to degrade God's glory through making an image as an aid to His worship is always with us. Even what some people regard as so harmless a thing as a cross in a church is really an image, for it is not Christ's cross itself but is a representation of the cross on which our Lord died and so it is an image of that cross; some crosses may be more realistic, others less so, but if they are used as sacred emblems in worship they come under the Bible's condemnation. Images are universal in heathen religions which shows they have a natural hold on the sinful human heart, and it is remarkable how tenaciously they are defended by those who use them in Christian worship. Church history gives ample proof of this; and anyone who wishes to remove them from Christian churches to-day will have ample proof of it!

It is worth reflecting further on why the Bible condemns images so strongly. The reason would seem to be that images get in the way of a true knowledge of God and the more prominent they are in the sight and in the mind of the worshipper the less possible it is for the worshipper to worship God in spirit and in truth, for material images anchor the imagination and the mind rather than assist them to rise to the true concept of God. At the best an image can only depict a very small part of God's character or action; and in particular it can do nothing towards presenting God as the giver of promises towards which the true worship of
faith is to be exercised. It is because images hinder worship and obscure the true knowledge of God that they are so severely condemned in the Bible. On the other hand the Word of God as contained in the Scripture has the opposite effect. The Bible depicts God in His many sided character of love and righteousness and in His divinity in a way that no image can possibly do, so that if we are to know God we must know Him through His Word in Scripture and if we wish to worship Him we must worship Him by the response of faith to that Word. Our worship is to trust Him as He is known to us in Scripture and its promises. Moreover the Word of God is living. The Holy Spirit uses it to quicken our conscience and stir our imagination in a way no image is ever used by Him. Thus through the pages of Scripture in which God is perfectly revealed as the supplier of all our needs we come into a living relationship with Him. But to try to do this through an image is simply hopeless. It is a dead-end method, for the image anchors our imagination to itself, and in the end transfers the divine attributes to itself and we finish up worshipping the image, as we have seen from the pamphlet I have quoted. So the worshipper becomes an idolater and never reaches a living relationship with the true God. If therefore, you wish to decorate your church or your home with religious emblems, you should use texts of Scripture rather than static pictures or objects. For example if you have a large picture of Christ in your house you will finish up in the end by being unable to think about Christ except in terms of that picture. Even when you read the Bible your imagination is anchored to the picture, and you won't be able to take in what God has to say to you through His living Word. The same is true of a large cross in front of the congregation in church. Every time the preacher mentions the cross the mind will go to the image, instead of rising to Christ, now seated crowned at God's right hand. But how different is your knowledge of Christ if you derive it solely from the many sided
mental pictures that the Bible brings before us as we read it or hear it preached and which the Holy Spirit uses to enliven our imagination and stir our will. None of us dare ignore the plain statements of Scripture which make clear that God does not wish us to worship Him by means of representations whether picture or statue; rather if we wish to enliven our imagination with the knowledge of what God is and to adore Him in truth, let us meditate on His Word which He has given us for that purpose.

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