

# Should We Make Images of Jesus?

The Relationship between the Second Commandment and Images of Christ by Andrew Webb

*The Following is a Brief listing of just some of the Reformed Evangelical witnesses that directly address the creation and use of pictures of Jesus, either in worship, decoration, art, or mental imagery. They are arranged in chronological order from the Reformation to the present day.*

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### **(1561) The Second Helvetic Confession – Chapter IV (Of Idols or Images of God, Christ and The Saints)**

Images of God. Since God as Spirit is in essence invisible and immense, he cannot really be expressed by any art or image. For this reason we have no fear pronouncing with Scripture that images of God are mere lies. Therefore we reject not only the idols of the Gentiles, but also the images of Christians. Although Christ assumed human nature, yet he did not on that account assume it in order to provide a model for carvers and painters. He denied that he had come to abolish the law and the prophets (Matt. 5:17). But images are forbidden by the law and the prophets (Deut. 4:15; Isa. 44:9). He denied that his bodily presence would be profitable for the Church, and promised that he would be near us by his Spirit forever (John 16:7). Who, therefore, would believe that a shadow or likeness of his body would contribute any benefit to the pious? (II Cor. 5:5). Since he abides in us by his Spirit, we are therefore the temple of God (II Cor. 3:16). But what agreement has the temple of God with idols? (II Cor. 6:16).

### **(1648) The Westminster Larger Catechism Q&A 109**

Q109: What are the sins forbidden in the second commandment?

A109: The sins forbidden in the second commandment are, all devising,[1] counseling,[2] commanding,[3] using,[4] and anywise approving, any religious worship not instituted by God himself;[5] tolerating a false religion;[6] 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;[7] all worshiping of it,[8] or God in it or by it;[9] the making of any representation of feigned deities,[10] and all worship of them, or service belonging to them;[11] all superstitious devices,[12] corrupting the worship of God,[13] adding to it, or taking from it,[14] whether invented and taken up of ourselves,[15] or received by tradition from others,[16] though under the title of antiquity,[17] custom,[18]

devotion,[19] good intent, or any other pretense whatsoever;[20] simony;[21] sacrilege;[22] all neglect,[23] contempt,[24] hindering,[25] and opposing the worship and ordinances which God hath appointed.[26]

1. Num. 15:39	14. Deut. 4:2
2. Deut. 13:6-8	15. Psa. 106:39
3. Hosea 5:11; Micah 6:16	16. Matt. 15:9
4. I Kings 11:33; 12:33	17. I Peter 1:18
5. Deut. 12:30-32	18. Jer. 44:17
6. Deut. 13:6-12; Zech. 13:2-3; Rev. 2:2, 14-15, 20, Rev. 17:12, 16-17	19. Isa. 65:3-5; Gal. 1:13-14
7. Deut. 4:15-19; Acts 17:29; Rom. 1:21-23, 25	20. I Sam. 13:11-12; 15:21
8. Dan. 3:18; Gal. 4:8	21. Acts 8:18
9. Exod. 32:5	22. Rom. 2:22; Mal. 3:8
10. Exod. 32:8	23. Exod. 4:24-26
11. I Kings 18:26, 28; Isa. 65:11	24. Matt. 22:5; Mal. 1:7, 13
12. Acts 17:22; Col. 2:21-23	25. Matt. 23:13
13. Mal. 1:7-8, 14	26. Acts 13:44-45; I Thess. 2:15-16

**(1674) Thomas Vincent, A Family Instructional Guide**

“QUESTION 5: Is it not lawful to have images or pictures of God by us, so we do not worship them, nor God by them?

ANSWER: The images or pictures of God are an abomination, and utterly unlawful, because they debase God, and may be a cause of idolatrous worship.

QUESTION 6: Is it not lawful to have pictures of Jesus Christ, he being a man as well as God?

ANSWER: It is not lawful to have pictures of Jesus Christ, because his divine nature cannot be pictured at all; and because his body, as it is now glorified, cannot be pictured as it is; and because, if it do not stir up devotion, it is in vain; if it stir up devotion, it is a worshipping by an image or picture, and so a palpable breach of the second commandment.” [Thomas Vincent, A Family Instructional Guide]

**(1679) John Owen, The Glory of Christ**

Many there are who, not comprehending, not being affected with, that divine, spiritual description of the person of Christ which is given us by the Holy Ghost in the Scripture, do feign unto themselves false representations of him by images and pictures, so as to excite carnal and corrupt affections in their minds. By the help of their outward senses, they reflect on their imaginations the shape of a human body, cast into postures and circumstances dolorous or triumphant; and so, by the working of their fancy, raise a commotion of mind in themselves, which they suppose to be love unto Christ. But all these idols are teaches of lies. The true beauty and amiableness of the person of Christ, which is the formal object and cause of divine love, is so far from being represented herein, as that the mind is thereby wholly diverted from the contemplation of it. For no more can be so

pictured unto us but what may belong unto a mere man, and what is arbitrarily referred unto Christ, not by faith, but by corrupt imagination.

The beauty of the person of Christ, as represented in the Scripture, consists in things invisible unto the eyes of flesh. They are such as no hand of man can represent or shadow. It is the eye of faith alone that can see this King in his beauty. What else can contemplate on the untreated glories of his divine nature? Can the hand of man represent the union of his natures in the same person, wherein he is peculiarly amiable? What eye can discern the mutual communications of the properties of his different natures in the same person, which depends thereon, whence it is that God laid down his life for us, and purchased his church with his own blood? In these things, O vain man! does the loveliness of the person of Christ unto the souls of believers consist, and not in those strokes of art which fancy has guided a skilful hand and pencil unto. And what eye of flesh can discern the inhabitation of the Spirit in all fulness in the human nature? Can his condescension, his love, his grace, his power, his compassion, his offices, his fitness and ability to save sinners, be deciphered on a tablet, or engraven on wood or stone? However such pictures may be adorned, however beautified and enriched, they are not that Christ which the soul of the spouse does love;-they are not any means of representing his love unto us, or of conveying our love unto him;-they only divert the minds of superstitious persons from the Son of God, unto the embraces of a cloud, composed of fancy and imagination.

Others there are who abhor these idols, and when they have so done, commit sacrilege. As they reject images, so they seem to do all love unto the person of Christ, distinct from other acts of obedience, as a fond imagination. But the most superstitious love unto Christ-that is, love acted in ways tainted with superstition-is better than none at all. But with what eyes do such persons read the Scriptures? With what hearts do they consider them? What do they conceive is the intention of the Holy Ghost in all those descriptions which he gives us of the person of Christ as amiable and desirable above all things, making wherewithal a proposal of him unto our affections-inciting us to receive him by faith, and to cleave unto him in love? yea, to what end is our nature endued with this affection-unto what end is the power of it renewed in us by the sanctification of the Holy Spirit-if it may not

be fixed on this most proper and excellent object of it? This is the foundation of our love unto Christ namely, the revelation and proposal of him unto us in the Scripture as altogether lovely. The discovery that is made therein of the glorious excellencies and endowments of his person-of his love, his goodness, and grace-of his worth and work-is that which engageth the affections of believers unto him. It may be said, that if there be such a proposal of him made unto all promiscuously, then all would equally discern his amiableness and be affected with it, who assent equally unto the truth of that revelation. But it has always fallen out otherwise. In the days of his flesh, some that looked on him could see neither “ form nor comeliness ” in him Therefore he should be desired; others saw his glory-“ glory as of the only-begotten of the Father, full of grace and truth ”. To some he is precious; unto others he is disallowed and rejected-a stone which the builders refused, when others brought it forth, crying, “ Grace, grace unto it ” as the head of the corner. Some can see nothing but weakness in him; unto others the wisdom and power of God do evidently shine forth in him. Therefore it must be said, that notwithstanding that open, plain representation that is made of him in the Scripture, unless the holy Spirit gives us eyes to discern it, and circumcise our hearts by the cutting off corrupt prejudices and all effects of unbelief, implanting in them, by the efficacy of his grace, this blessed affection of love unto him, all these things will make no impression on our minds.

As it was with the people on the giving of the law, notwithstanding all the great and mighty works which God had wrought among them, yet having not given them “ a heart to perceive, and eyes to see, and ears to hear ”-which he affirms that he had not done, Deut. 29:4, they were not moved unto faith or obedience by them; so is it in the preaching of the gospel. Notwithstanding all the blessed revelation that is made of the excellencies of the person of Christ therein, yet those into whose hearts God does not shine to give the knowledge of his glory in his face, can discern nothing of it, nor are their hearts affected with it.

We do not, therefore, in these things, follow “ cunningly-devised fables. ” We do not indulge unto our own fancies and imaginations;- they are not unaccountable raptures or

ecstasies which are pretended unto, nor such an artificial conjoining of thoughts as some ignorant of these things do boast that they can give an account of.

Our love to Christ ariseth alone from the revelation that is made of him in the Scripture is ingenerated, regulated, measured, and is to be judged thereby.

**(1692) Thomas Watson, The Ten Commandments**

If it is not lawful to make the image of God the Father, yet may we not make an image of Christ, who took upon him the nature of man?

No! Epiphanies, seeing an image of Christ hanging in a church, brake it in pieces. 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.

**(1700) Wilhelmus A'Brakel, The Christian's Reasonable Service**

Question: Are men permitted to make images of God—that is, of the Father, the Son, and the Holy Spirit—and of deceased saints, in order to worship and honor them, or to serve God and the saints by them?

We declare, on the contrary, that the making of images of the Trinity is absolutely forbidden. We neither know the spiritual nature of the angels nor the true physical appearance of Christ and the apostles. Thus, the images made of them are without resemblance, and it is vanity to make an image and say: That is Christ, that is Mary, that is Peter, etc. Yes, even if we had their true pictures, we may nevertheless not worship, honor, nor engage in any religious activity toward them. We may not honor Christ, Mary, Peter, and other saints in this manner. The question is twofold, and we shall refute each part individually.

In the first place, one may make no images of God whatsoever; that is, of the Father, of the Son, and of the Holy Spirit.

Firstly, this is absolutely forbidden in this commandment and in many other passages. Consider only the following passage: “Ye heard the voice of the words, but saw no similitude; take ye therefore good heed unto yourselves...lest ye corrupt yourselves, and make you a graven image, the similitude of any figure, the likeness of male or female, the likeness of any beast that is on the earth, the likeness of any winged fowl that flieth in the air, the likeness of any thing that creepeth on the ground, the likeness of any fish that is in the waters beneath the earth: and lest thou lift up thine eyes unto heaven, and when thou seest the sun, and the moon, and the stars, even all the host of heaven, shouldest be driven to worship them, and serve them, which the LORD thy God hath divided unto all nations under the whole heaven” (Deut. 4:12, 15–19). Who then, while believing the Word of God, would be so bold to act blatantly contrary to this and make images of God—a practice clearly forbidden?

Secondly, God cannot be depicted and it is therefore God’s will that such ought not to occur. “To whom then will ye liken God? or what likeness will ye compare unto Him?” (Isa. 40:18).

Thirdly, it highly dishonors God. “And changed the glory of the uncorruptible God into an image made like to corruptible man, and to birds, and fourfooted beasts, and creeping things” (Rom. 1:23). The Papists readily imitate this. They depict God the Father in the appearance of a man, that is, of an old man; God the Son in the appearance of a four-footed beast, that is, of a lamb; and God the Holy Spirit in the appearance of a bird, that is, a dove. They thus dishonor God as the heathen do.

Fourthly, it corrupts man. “Take ye therefore good heed unto yourselves...lest ye corrupt yourselves” (Deut. 4:15–16). For this prompts man to think of God—who is a Spirit, and who must be served in Spirit—in physical terms.

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Objection #2: Both the images of God and of the saints have educational value .

Answer:

(1) God has nevertheless forbidden this. This is pagan thinking and we should not pretend it to be beneficial, since it is forbidden.

(2) God will not have us taught by dumb images, but by His Word. “Thy testimonies also are my delight and my counsellors. Thy word is a lamp unto my feet, and a light unto my path” (Ps. 119:24, 105).

**(1753) Ebenezer Erskine and James Fisher, The Assembly’s Shorter Catechism Explained, By Way of Question and Answer**

Q. 9. May we not have a picture of Christ, who has a true body?

A. By no means; because, though he has a true body and a reasonable soul, John 1:14, yet his human nature subsists in his divine person, which no picture can represent, Psalm 45:2.

Q. 10. Why ought all pictures of Christ to be abominated by Christians?

A. Because they are downright lies, representing no more than the picture of a mere man: whereas, the true Christ is God-man; “Immanuel, God with us,” 1 Tim. 3:16; Matt. 1:23.

**(1949) J.G. Vos (son of Geerhardus Vos) Commentary on the Westminster Larger Catechism**

2. Is it wrong to make paintings or pictures of our Savior Jesus Christ? According to the Larger Catechism, this is certainly wrong, for the catechism interprets the second commandment as forbidding the making of any representation of any of the three persons of the Trinity, which would certainly include Jesus Christ, the second person of the Trinity, God the Son. While pictures of Jesus are extremely common in the present day, we should realize that in Calvinistic circles this is a relatively modern development. Our forefathers at the time of the Reformation, and for perhaps 300 years afterward, scrupulously refrained, as a matter of principle, from sanctioning or making use of pictures of Jesus Christ. Such pictures are so common in the present day, and so few people have conscientious objections to them, that; it is practically impossible to obtain any Sabbath School helps or

Bible story; material for children that is free of such pictures. The American Bible Society is to be commended for its decision that the figure of the Savior may not appear in Bible motion pictures issued by the Society.

3. What attitude should we adopt in view of the present popularity of pictures of Jesus Christ? The following considerations may be suggested as bearing on this question: (a) The Bible presents no information whatever about the personal appearance of Jesus Christ, but it does teach that we are not to think of him as he may have appeared “in the days of his flesh,” but as he is today in heavenly glory, in his estate of exaltation (2 Cor. 5:46). (b) Inasmuch as the Bible presents no data about the personal appearance of our Savior, all artists’ pictures of him are wholly imaginary and constitute only the artists’ ideas of his character and appearance. (c) Unquestionably pictures of the Savior have been very greatly influenced by the theological viewpoint of the artist. The typical modern picture of Jesus is the product of nineteenth-century “Liberalism” and presents a “gentle Jesus” who emphasized only the love and Fatherhood of God and said little or nothing about sin, judgment, and eternal punishment. (d) Perhaps more people living today have derived their ideas of Jesus Christ from these typically “liberal” pictures of Jesus than have derived their ideas of Jesus from the Bible itself. Such people inevitably think of Jesus as a human person, rather than thinking of him according to the biblical teaching as a divine person with a human nature. The inevitable effect of the popular acceptance of pictures of Jesus is to overemphasize his humanity and to forget or neglect his deity (which of course no picture can portray). (e) In dealing with an evil so widespread and almost universally accepted, we should bear a clear testimony against what we believe to be wrong, but we should not expect any sudden change in Christian sentiment on this question. It will require many years of education in scriptural principles before the churches and their members can be brought back to the high position of the Westminster Assembly on this question. Patience will be required.

4. Are not pictures of Jesus legitimate provided they are not worshiped or used as “aids to worship”? As interpreted by the Westminster Assembly, the second commandment certainly forbids all representations of any of the persons of the Trinity, and this coupled

with the truth taught in the Westminster Standards that Christ is a divine person with a human nature taken into union with himself, and not a human person, would imply that it is wrong to make pictures of Jesus Christ for any purpose whatever. Of course, there is a difference between using pictures of Jesus to illustrate children's Bible story books or lessons, and using pictures of Jesus in worship as Roman Catholics use them. Admittedly the former is not an evil in the same class with the latter. In spite of this distinction, however, there are good reasons for holding that our forefathers of the Reformation were right in opposing all pictorial representation of the Savior. We should realize that the popularity – even the almost unchallenged prevalence – of a particular practice does not prove that it is right. To prove that a practice is right we must show that it is in harmony with the commands and principles revealed in the Word of God. Merely showing that a practice is common, is useful, or seems to have good results does not prove it is right.

**(1961) Prof. John Murray, Pictures of Christ**

“Secondly, pictures of Christ are in principle a violation of the second commandment. A picture of Christ, if it serves any useful purpose, must evoke some thought or feeling respecting him and, in view of what he is, this thought or feeling will be worshipful. We cannot avoid making the picture a medium of worship. But since the materials for this medium of worship are not derived from the only revelation we possess respecting Jesus, namely, Scripture, the worship is constrained by a creation of the human mind that has no revelatory warrant. This is will-worship. For the principle of the second commandment is that we are to worship God only in ways prescribed and authorized by him. It is a grievous sin to have worship constrained by a human figment, and that is what a picture of the Saviour involves.”

**(1970) G.I. Williamson, The Shorter Catechism For Study Classes**

The second commandment is broken when men attempt to make a graven image or a picture of the Lord Jesus Christ. The Bible teaches us that there is one God. It teaches us to

worship the three persons, the father, the Son, and the Holy Spirit, as one God, the same in substance, equal in power and glory. But Paul tells us that we “ought not to think that the Godhead is like unto gold, or silver, or stone graven by art and man’s device” (Acts 17:29)...

There was a time when the Protestants recognized this evil. They saw the images in the Roman Catholic Church and they understood that this was a violation of the second commandment. They realized that this was wrong – this making of images and likenesses of Christ – even though the Roman Catholic Church was careful to say that it did not want people to worship these images, but only to worship the Lord through these images. But now, it seems, many Protestants have accepted the Roman Catholic position. They may not realize this. And they may still think, in their minds, that there is an important difference between a statue (image) and a picture (likeness). But the commandment recognizes no such difference. It forbids us to make any likeness, just as it forbids us to make any image, of the Lord.

#### **(1973) J.I. Packer, *Knowing God*, Chapter 4**

What does the word idolatry suggest to your mind? Savages groveling before a totem pole? Cruel-faced statues in Hindu temples? The dervish dance of the priests of Baal around Elijah’s altar? These things are certainly idolatrous, in a very obvious way; but we need to realize that there are more subtle forms of idolatry as well.

Look at the second commandment. It runs as follows, “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” ( Ex 20:4–5 ). What is this commandment talking about?

If it stood alone, it would be natural to suppose that it refers to the worship of images of gods other than Jehovah-the Babylonian idol worship, for instance, which Isaiah derided ( Is 44:9–20 ; 46:6–7 ), or the paganism of the Greco–Roman world of Paul’s day, of which he wrote in Romans 1:23 , 25 that they “exchanged the glory of the immortal God for images made to look like mortal man and birds and animals and reptiles. . . . They

exchanged the truth of God for a lie, and worshiped and served created things rather than the Creator.” But in its context the second commandment can hardly be referring to this sort of idolatry, for if it were it would simply be repeating the thought of the first commandment without adding anything to it.

Accordingly, we take the second commandment—as in fact it has always been taken—as pointing us to the principle that (to quote Charles Hodge) “idolatry consists not only in the worship of false gods, but also in the worship of the true God by images.” In its Christian application, this means that we are not to make use of visual or pictorial representations of the triune God, or of any person of the Trinity, for the purposes of Christian worship. The commandment thus deals not with the object of our worship, but with the manner of it; what it tells us is that statues and pictures of the One whom we worship are not to be used as an aid to worshipping him.

#### The Dangers in Images:

It may seem strange at first sight that such a prohibition should find a place among the ten basic principles of biblical religion, for at first sight it does not seem to have much point. What harm is there, we ask, in the worshiper’s surrounding himself with statues and pictures, if they help him to lift his heart to God?

We are accustomed to treating the question of whether these things should be used or not as a matter of temperament and personal taste. We know that some people have crucifixes and pictures of Christ in their rooms, and they tell us that looking at these objects helps them to focus their thoughts on Christ when they pray. We know that many claim to be able to worship more freely and easily in churches that are filled with such ornaments than they can in churches that are bare of them. Well, we say, what is wrong with that? What harm can these things do? If people really do find them helpful, what more is there to be said? What point can there be in prohibiting them? In the face of this perplexity, some would suggest that the second commandment applies only to immoral and degrading representations of God, borrowed from pagan cults, and to nothing more.

But the very wording of the commandment rules out such a limiting exposition. God says quite categorically, “Thou shalt not make any likeness of any thing” for use in worship. This categorical statement rules out not simply the use of pictures and statues which depict God as an animal, but also the use of pictures and statues which depict him as the highest created thing we know—a human. It also rules out the use of pictures and statues of Jesus Christ as a man, although Jesus himself was and remains man; for all pictures and statues are necessarily made after the “likeness” of ideal manhood as we conceive it, and therefore come under the ban which the commandment imposes.

Historically, Christians have differed as to whether the second commandment forbids the use of pictures of Jesus for purposes of teaching and instruction (in Sunday–school classes, for instance), and the question is not an easy one to settle; but there is no room for doubting that the commandment obliges us to dissociate our worship, both in public and in private, from all pictures and statues of Christ, no less than from pictures and statues of his Father.

But what, in that case, is the point of this comprehensive prohibition? From the emphasis given to the commandment itself, with the frightening sanction attached to it (the proclaiming of God’s jealousy, and his severity in punishing transgressors), one would suppose that this must really be a matter of crucial importance. But is it?

The answer is yes. The Bible shows us that the glory of God and the spiritual well–being of humans are both directly bound up with it. Two lines of thought are set before us which together amply explain why this commandment should have been stressed so emphatically. These lines of thought relate, not to the real or supposed helpfulness of images, but to the truth of them. They are as follows:

1. Images dishonor God, for they obscure his glory . The likeness of things in heaven (sun, moon, stars), and in earth (people, animals, birds, insects), and in the sea (fish, mammals, crustaceans), is precisely not a likeness of their Creator. “A true image of God,” wrote Calvin, “is not to be found in all the world; and hence . . . His glory is defiled, and His truth corrupted by the lie, whenever He is set before our eyes in a visible form. . . .Therefore, to

devise any image of God is itself impious; because by this corruption His majesty is adulterated, and He is figured to be other than He is.”

The point here is not just that an image represents God as having body and parts, whereas in reality he has neither. If this were the only ground of objection to images, representations of Christ would be blameless. But the point really goes much deeper. The heart of the objection to pictures and images is that they inevitably conceal most, if not all, of the truth about the personal nature and character of the divine Being whom they represent.

To illustrate: Aaron made a golden calf (that is, a bull-image). It was meant as a visible symbol of Jehovah, the mighty God who had brought Israel out of Egypt. No doubt the image was thought to honor him, as being a fitting symbol of his great strength. But it is not hard to see that such a symbol in fact insults him, for what idea of his moral character, his righteousness, goodness and patience could one gather from looking at a statue of him as a bull? Thus Aaron’s image hid Jehovah’s glory.

In a similar way, the pathos of the crucifix obscures the glory of Christ, for it hides the fact of his deity, his victory on the cross, and his present kingdom. It displays his human weakness, but it conceals his divine strength; it depicts the reality of his pain, but keeps out of our sight the reality of his joy and his power. In both these cases, the symbol is unworthy most of all because of what it fails to display. And so are all other visible representations of deity.

Whatever we may think of religious art from a cultural standpoint, 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. And this is why God added to the second commandment a reference to himself as “jealous” to avenge himself on those who disobey him: for God’s “jealousy” in the Bible is his zeal to maintain his own glory, which is jeopardized when images are used in worship.

In Isaiah 40:18, after vividly declaring God’s immeasurable greatness, the Scripture asks us: “To whom, then, will you compare God? What image will you compare him to?” The

question does not expect an answer, only a chastened silence. Its purpose is to remind us that it is as absurd as it is impious to think that an image modeled, as images must be, upon some creature could be an acceptable likeness of the Creator.

Nor is this the only reason why we are forbidden to use images in worship.

2. Images mislead us, for they convey false ideas about God . The very inadequacy with which they represent him perverts our thoughts of him and plants in our minds errors of all sorts about his character and will.

Aaron, by making an image of God in the form of a bull-calf, led the Israelites to think of him as a Being who could be worshiped acceptably by frenzied debauchery. Hence the “festival to the Lord ” which Aaron organized ( Ex 32:5 ) became a shameful orgy. Again, it is a matter of historical fact that the use of the crucifix as an aid to prayer has encouraged people to equate devotion with brooding over Christ’s bodily sufferings; it has made them morbid about the spiritual value of physical pain, and it has kept them from knowledge of the risen Savior.

These examples show how images will falsify the truth of God in the minds of men.

Psychologically, it is certain that if you habitually focus your thoughts on an image or picture of the One to whom you are going to pray, you will come to think of him, and pray to him, as the image represents him. Thus you will in this sense “bow down” and “worship” your image; and to the extent to which the image fails to tell the truth about God, to that extent you will fail to worship God in truth. That is why God forbids you and me to make use of images and pictures in our worship.

Molten Images and Mental Images:

The realization that images and pictures of God affect our thoughts of God points to a further realm in which the prohibition of the second commandment applies. Just as it forbids us to manufacture molten images of God, so it forbids us to dream up mental images of him. Imagining God in our heads can be just as real a breach of the second commandment as imagining him by the work of our hands.

How often do we hear this sort of thing: “I like to think of God as the great Architect (or Mathematician or Artist).” “I don’t think of God as a Judge; I like to think of him simply as a Father.” We know from experience how often remarks of this kind serve as the prelude to a denial of something that the Bible tells us about God. It needs to be said with the greatest possible emphasis that those who hold themselves free to think of God as they like are breaking the second commandment. At best, they can only think of God in the image of man—as an ideal man, perhaps, or a superman. But God is not any sort of man. We were made in his image, but we must not think of him as existing in ours. To think of God in such terms is to be ignorant of him, not to know him.

All speculative theology, which rests on philosophical reasoning rather than biblical revelation, is at fault here. Paul tells us where this sort of theology ends: “The world by wisdom knew not God” ( 1 Cor 1:21 KJV). To follow the imagination of one’s heart in the realm of theology is the way to remain ignorant of God, and to become an idol-worshipper—the idol in this case being a false mental image of God, made by one’s own speculation and imagination.

In this light, the positive purpose of the second commandment becomes plain. Negatively, it is a warning against ways of worship and religious practice that lead us to dishonor God and to falsify his truth. Positively, it is a summons to us to recognize that God the Creator is transcendent, mysterious and inscrutable, beyond the range of any imagining or philosophical guesswork of which we are capable—and hence a summons to us to humble ourselves, to listen and learn of him, and to let him teach us what he is like and how we should think of him.

“For my thoughts are not your thoughts,” God tells us; “neither are your ways my ways,” for “as the heavens are higher than the earth, so are my ways higher than your ways, and my thoughts than your thoughts” ( Is 55:8–9 ). Paul speaks in the same vein: “Oh, the depth of the riches of the wisdom and knowledge of God! How unsearchable his judgments, and his paths beyond tracing out! Who has known the mind of the Lord?” ( Rom 11:33–34 ).

God is not the sort of person that we are; his wisdom, his aims, his scale of values, his mode of procedure differ so vastly from our own that we cannot possibly guess our way to them by intuition or infer them by analogy from our notion of ideal manhood. We cannot know him unless he speaks and tells us about himself.

But in fact he has spoken. He has spoken to and through his prophets and apostles, and he has spoken in the words and deeds of his own Son. Through this revelation, which is made available to us in holy Scripture, we may form a true notion of God; without it we never can. Thus it appears that the positive force of the second commandment is that it compels us to take our thoughts of God from his own holy Word, and from no other source whatsoever.

That this is the commandment's positive thrust seems plain from the very form in which it is stated. Having forbidden the making and worshiping of images, God declares himself jealous; he will punish not image worshipers as such but all who "hate him," in the sense of disregarding his commandments as a whole.

The natural and expected thing in the context would be a specific threat to image-users; why, instead, is God's threat generalized? Surely this is in order to make us realize that those who make images and use them in worship, and thus inevitably take their theology from them, will in fact tend to neglect God's revealed will at every point. The mind that takes up with images is a mind that has not yet learned to love and attend to God's Word. Those who look to manmade images, material or mental, to lead them to God are not likely to take any part of his revelation as seriously as they should.

In Deuteronomy 4, Moses himself expounds the prohibition of images in worship along exactly these lines, setting the making of images in opposition to the heeding of God's word and commandments as if these two things were completely exclusive of each other. He reminds the people that at Sinai, though they saw tokens of God's presence, they saw no visible representation of God himself, but only heard his word, and he exhorts them to continue to live, as it were, at the foot of the mount, with God's own word ringing in their ears to direct them and no supposed image of God before their eyes to distract them.

The point is clear. God did not show them a visible symbol of himself, but spoke to them; therefore they are not now to seek visible symbols of God, but simply to obey his Word. If it be said that Moses was afraid of the Israelites borrowing designs for images from the idolatrous nations around them, our reply is that undoubtedly he was, and this is exactly the point: all manmade images of God, whether molten or mental, are really borrowings from the stock-in-trade of a sinful and ungodly world, and are bound therefore to be out of accord with God's own holy Word. To make an image of God is to take one's thoughts of him from a human source, rather than from God himself; and this is precisely what is wrong with image-making.

Looking to the True God:

The question which arises for us all from the line of thought which we have been pursuing is this: How far are we keeping the second commandment? Granted, there are no bull-images in the churches we attend, and probably we have not got a crucifix in the house (though we may have some pictures of Christ on our walls that we ought to think twice about); but are we sure that the God whom we seek to worship is the God of the Bible, the triune Jehovah? Do we worship the one true God in truth? Or are our ideas of God such that in reality we do not believe in the Christian God, but in some other, just as the Muslim or Jew or Jehovah's Witness does not believe in the Christian God, but in some other?

You may say, how can I tell? Well, the test is this. The God of the Bible has spoken in his Son. The light of the knowledge of his glory is given to us in the face of Jesus Christ. Do I look habitually to the person and work of the Lord Jesus Christ as showing me the final truth about the nature and the grace of God? Do I see all the purposes of God as centering upon him?

If I have been enabled to see this, and in mind and heart to go to Calvary and lay hold of the Calvary solution, then I can know that I truly worship the true God, and that he is my God, and that I am even now enjoying eternal life, according to our Lord's own definition, "Now this is eternal life: that they may know you, the only true God, and Jesus Christ, whom you have sent" ( Jn 17:3 ).

**(1993) J.I. Packer – Additional Note**

A steady trickle of letters over the years has urged that my dissuasive from using images of God for didactic or devotional purposes goes too far. Does it?

Three arguments are brought against it. First, the worship of God requires Christian aesthetic expression through the visual arts no less than it requires Christian moral expression through family love and neighbor love. Second, imagination is part of human nature as God made it and should be sanctified and expressed, rather than stigmatized and suppressed, in our communion with our Creator. Third, images (crucifixes, icons, statues, pictures of Jesus) do in fact trigger devotion, which would be weaker without them.

The principle of the first argument is surely right, but it needs to be rightly applied.

Symbolic art can serve worship in many ways, but the second commandment still forbids anything that will be thought of as a representational image of God. If paintings, drawings and statues of Jesus, the incarnate Son, were always viewed as symbols of human perfection within the culture that produced them (white-faced Anglo-Saxon, black-faced African, yellow-faced Chinese or whatever), rather than as suggesting what Jesus actually looked like, no harm would be done. But since neither children nor unsophisticated adults view them in this way we shall in my opinion be wiser to do without them.

The principle of the second argument is also right, but the biblical way to apply it is to harness our verbal and visual imagination to the task of appreciating the drama and marvel of God's historical doings, as is done in the Prophets and the Psalms and the book of Revelation, rather than to fly in the face of the second commandment by constructing static and seemingly representational images of him.

As for the third argument, the problem is that as soon as the images are treated as representational rather than symbolic, they begin to corrupt the devotion they trigger. Since it is hard for us humans to avoid this pitfall, wisdom counsels once more that the better, safer way is to learn to do without them. Some risks are not worth taking. [Packer, J.I. *Knowing God.*, Downers Grove: InterVarsity, 1996, c1973.]

### **(2004) Andrew Webb – Final Thoughts**

To the arguments that are made above, I would add this pragmatic argument against making pictures of Jesus that I find particularly compelling.

Jesus is the Lord of the Nations. In Him the middle wall of separation is decisively broken down and “there is neither Greek nor Jew, circumcised nor uncircumcised, barbarian, Scythian, slave nor free.” When we make a picture of Christ we inevitably portray him as representative of one race or another. Mel Gibson’s Jesus, for instance, is obviously very white. We have once again created a false Jesus that one race can feel comfortable with. He is “one of us.” While this is comforting to members of that particular race, it is inevitably irritating to people of other cultures and can actually be a barrier to communicating the gospel to other nations and races. As a result of all the images of the Scandinavian Hippy that westerners have called Jesus, there has been an inevitable backlash and now images of Asian, Middle-Eastern, African, etc. Jesus’ are being demanded, and these counter-images offend many Westerners. “That’s not Jesus!” they angrily proclaim, because they know what Jesus looks like – they’ve been seeing images of him since they were children. He’s tall, and blond, has a beard and a vaguely sorrowful expression.

The sad thing about this whole argument over what Jesus looked like is that it is so needless. The Apostolic church turned the whole world upside-down via the preaching of the Gospel. Not once did they use pictures of Jesus. What would Peter or Paul say coming into one of our churches and seeing one of our many images of Jesus? Obviously they wouldn’t recognize it as the image of the Savior they knew. Wouldn’t they assume that this was yet another example of the kind of Hellenistic idolatry they were so familiar, “Men of America, I perceive that in all things you are very religious...” Aren’t we best served proclaiming the gospel of a Christ who is too glorious to be portrayed as a mere man from any one race?