



## Thoughts from the Bible and Books Devotions from The Heidelberg Catechism

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96 **Q.** *What is God's will for us in the second commandment?*

**A.** That we in no way make any image of God nor worship him in any other way than he has commanded in his Word.

97 **Q.** *May we then not make any image at all?*

**A.** God can not and may not be visibly portrayed in any way. Although creatures may be portrayed, yet God forbids making or having such images if one's intention is to worship them or to serve God through them.

98 **Q.** *But may not images be permitted in the churches as teaching aids for the unlearned?*

**A.** No, we shouldn't try to be wiser than God. He wants his people instructed by the living preaching of his Word - not by idols that cannot even talk.

If the first commandment prohibits idolatrous worship (worshipping the wrong God) then the second commandment forbids self-willed worship (worshipping God incorrectly). Certainly, idolatry is still a fitting term to describe the worship of images. But it is an idolatry of a different kind. We must remember that while the Israelites could be guilty of worshipping false gods, but they were also guilty of trying to worship Yahweh in false ways. The Golden Calf is an example of the latter sin, not the former. The Israelites didn't mean for the Golden Calf to be a different god than Yahweh. In fact, when the people saw the calf they cried, "These are your gods, O Israel, who brought you up out of the land of Egypt!" Likewise, Aaron proclaimed a feast to Yahweh when the calf was unveiled (32:4-5). The Israelites weren't worshipping Baal or Ashera with the calf, they were trying to worship Yahweh, but they were doing so in a tragically misguided way. They were violating the second commandment more than the first.

The second commandment makes two prohibitions. Number one, we are not to make images that portray God in any form (Q/A 96-97). Number two, we are not to make any pictures or images if our intention is to worship those images or worship God through them (Q/A 97). This doesn't mean there is no place for art or sculpting or painting in the Christian life. We can make images of creatures or the creation, just not the Creator. And in making images of creation or creatures, we can do so for the sake of artistry or beauty, so long as it is not a vehicle for worship. We see

from the examples of Bezalel and Oholiab (see Exodus 36) and from the artistry in the tabernacle/temple that it is not wrong to have ornamentation and decoration in life, or even in places of worship. We don't have to be as plain as possible. What is wrong is to infuse these objects or ornamentations with spiritual efficacy as if these artifacts brought us closer to God, represented God, or established our communion with God.

For those of us reared in the church, especially Protestant churches, it seems obvious to us that our God - the one true God - cannot be represented by statues not worshiped with images. But why? That's a question we seldom consider. Why is the God of the Bible so adamant about his invisibility? Why does his anger break forth so violently when he is worshiped in the wrong way, especially with images?

There are several reasons for the Lord's strong aversion to visible representation. For starters, God is Spirit (John 4:24). He can't be seen. If you make an image of him or to represent him, you've lost God as he really is, because now you have a visible God instead of an invisible God. Similarly, God is free. Once you have something to represent God or worship as if it were your god, you undermine God's freedom. Idol worshipers think they can bring God with them by carrying a statue. They think they can manage God with rituals or treat him like a good luck charm (e.g., bringing the ark into battle in 1 Samuel 4). And once we think we need an

image to get God's attention or that using some artifact demands his attention, we have undercut his freedom.

God is also majestic. His glory cannot be captured in a picture or an image or a form. That's why even in Revelation when we have a vision of the one on the throne, he is "shown" to us in visual metaphors (lightning, rainbow, colors, sea, fire, lamps, thrones, etc.) because his glory is too great to be fully seen. It's no wonder then that our God is a jealous God. No image will be as good as God. So every image arouses his jealousy. God is supremely pure and he cannot bear to share his glory with another, even if the other is meant to represent him!

Finally, God prohibits image worship because he provides his own mediators. The saints in the Old Testament didn't need to fashion an intermediary for themselves. God had already promised to be their God and to reveal himself through the prophets, the priestly system and, later on, the Davidic kings. They didn't need statues to mediate God's presence. They already had it.

And if all this was true in the Old Testament, how much more is it true in the New Testament where we meet the one mediator between God and man, our Lord Jesus Christ, who is one with the Father (John 10:19), the radiance of the glory of God and the exact imprint of his nature (Heb. 1:3). We don't need a carving to mediate for us or an image to show us what God is like. Jesus showed us the God who cannot be seen. That's the mystery and majesty of the incarnation. We don't need icons, because we've had the icon. Christ is the image (*eikon*) of the invisible God (Col. 1:15).

So what does the second commandment really mean for us in the 21<sup>st</sup> century? Let me suggest several points of application. First, I see no place for the tradition of iconography that exists in some strands of the church. I fail to be convinced by the long-standing arguments that distinguish between worshiping icons and venerating them. I doubt most "veneraters" hold the distinction in their hearts or in their actions. As the Reformers often said, "Look at what they do, not at what they say the do." I'm not saying it is wrong to have a Rembrandt picture of Jesus in your house or a nativity set for Christmas. What's problematic is using pictures of Jesus (or Mary or angels or saints) to focus you in prayer, or statues and icons that you kiss or kneel before in worship, or relics that you infuse with spiritual significance and efficacy. No matter how we might try to parse these actions theologically, they are violations of the second commandment. Imagine the Israelites explaining to Moses that the golden calf was just an aid in worship or simply an object of veneration. I doubt Moses would have been impressed, nor God for that matter.

Second, we ought to guard against mental images of God. Sometimes Christians are encouraged to "picture God embracing you" or "imagine God running to you with arms wide open." Granted, as *metaphors* these may helpful images to convey God's love for us. But as actual vi-

sual pictures in our brains, these images are far less helpful. We should not construe God with a visible image either in carved stone or in our imagination.

Third, we should be cautious in our use of pictures of Jesus. I don't think it is forbidden to draw a picture of Jesus. After all, Jesus made the invisible God visible. He "broke" the second commandment. We don't want our kids to be docetists, thinking of Jesus as being spirit and only seeming (Greek *dokeo* = appears or seems) to have a body. Jesus is a man and we ought to picture him as a man. But we need to be careful we do not form mental images of Jesus that aren't accurate. No one knows for sure what Jesus looked like so we want to guard against assuming a certain look in our heads, whether that's a tow-headed, blue eyed, German looking Jesus or the Victorian high cheek boned, flowing hair, looks-like-he's-wearing-a-dress Jesus. I have no problem with artistic renderings of Jesus, even making him German, Chinese, African or whatever. There is a powerful theological truth conveyed in seeing Jesus depicted with a hundred different ethnicities. But we mustn't think these are portraits of the real Jesus. And we certainly don't want to attach spiritual efficacy to a visual image as often happens when popular Jesus pictures are hung up in our homes and churches decade after decade. Over time even the most diehard Protestant can develop unhealthy superstitions.

Fourth and finally, we need to be faithful to instruct the people of God. This is the point made in Q/A 98. We should not presume to be smarter than God. If God designed his people to be taught by the reading and preaching of Holy Scripture, we should not assume that he can't get the job done without images. The argument made during the Reformation was "We can't lose the images because they are books for the laity. They can't read. They won't understand the faith without them." To which the Reformers replied, "Then we must teach them."

Christianity is a religion where faith comes by hearing (Rom. 10:13-15). Our goal in worship, therefore, is not to entertain or impress the senses, but to edify the people by educating them in the word of God. This is not an excuse for snobbish elitism or impatience with the ignorant. But it means we must devote our energies to teaching people who God is, what he has done for us in Jesus, and what he commands of us (Matt. 28:19-20). We cannot simply capitulate to the contemporary ethos which laments short attention spans and linear thinking. We must resist the urge to get with the spirit of the age and feed our people with a steady diet of video clips and sermonettes. We must train God's people in the word of God, so that we can conceive of an invisible God, learn to hear him instead of see him, and be transformed by the renewing of our minds (Rom. 12:1-2).