

The Westminster Larger Catechism

Q. 108. What are the duties required in the second commandment?

Ans: The duties required in the second commandment are, the receiving, observing, and keeping pure and entire, all such religious worship and ordinances as God hath instituted in his Word; particularly prayer and thanksgiving in the name of Christ; the reading, preaching, and hearing of the Word; the administration and receiving of the sacraments; church government and discipline; the ministry and maintenance thereof; religious fasting; swearing by the name of God; and vowing unto him; as also the disapproving, detesting, opposing all false worship; and, according to each one's place and calling, removing it, and all monuments of idolatry.

Q. 109. What are the sins forbidden in the second commandment?

Ans: The sins forbidden in the second commandment are, all devising, counselling, commanding, using, and anywise approving, any religious worship not instituted by God himself; tolerating a false religion; **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;** all worshipping of it, or God in it or by it; the making of any representation of feigned deities, and all worship of them, or service belonging to them, all superstitious devices, corrupting the worship of God, adding to it, or taking from it, whether invented and taken up of ourselves, or received by tradition from others, though under the title of antiquity, custom, devotion, good intent, or any other pretence whatsoever; simony; sacrilege; all neglect, contempt, hindering, and opposing the worship and ordinances which God hath appointed..

Q. 110. What are the reasons annexed to the second commandment, the more to enforce it?

Ans: The reasons annexed to the second commandment, the more to enforce it, contained in these words, *For I the Lord thy God am a jealous God, visiting the iniquity of the fathers upon the children unto the third and fourth generation of them that hate me; and showing mercy unto thousands of them that love me, and keep my commandments;* are, besides God's sovereignty over us, and propriety in us, his fervent zeal for his own worship, and his revengeful indignation against all false worship, as being a spiritual whoredom; accounting the breakers of this commandment such as hate him, and threatening to punish them unto divers generations; and esteeming the observers of it such as love him and keep his commandments, and promising mercy to them unto many generations.

PICTURES OF CHRIST

by J. Marcellus Kik

“You shall not make for yourself any carved image, or any likeness of anything that is in heaven above, or that is in the earth beneath, or that is in the water under the earth; you shall not bow down to them nor serve them. For I, the LORD your God, am a jealous God, visiting the iniquity of the fathers on the children to the third and fourth generations of those who hate Me, but showing mercy to thousands, to those who love Me and keep My commandments.” Exodus 20:4-6

In this second commandment we are forbidden to make any graven image or any likeness of anything that is in heaven above, or that is in the earth beneath, or that is in the water under the earth. We are forbidden to bow down to them or to serve them. Now the question has been asked whether or not this commandment forbids the use of pictures of Christ. Naturally the commandment forbids the bowing down before such pictures and worshipping them. There can be no question of that.

But in many Protestant churches and in many evangelical churches pictures of Christ are used in teaching and in the homes of Christians pictures of Christ are hung up to remind them, I suppose, of Christ. Is that Scriptural? Does it meet with the approval of God? Is it sinful? Is it another way of breaking the second commandment?

No doubt, if I state that the use of pictures of Christ is unscriptural; that it does not meet with the approval of God; that it is sinful; and that it is a breaking of the second commandment—I will be considered as a fanatic, a reactionary, and perhaps not quite normal. But before you have such unkind thoughts please hear me out. If we are Christians our service and worship will be regulated by the Word of God. The Bible is our infallible guide in faith and worship.

Now here is the surprising thing. **Nowhere in the Bible, either in the Old Testament or New Testament, is there a physical description of Christ.** Isn't that strange if God wanted to use the picture of Christ in spreading the Gospel or in worship, that we are not told whether Christ was tall or short, fair or dark, light or dark hair, blue eyes or brown eyes.

With all their love for the Lord you would think that Peter or John would have given a description of Him, unless, of course, they were forbidden. They wrote under the inspiration of the Holy Spirit. Surely it is significant that neither they nor any other of the Scriptures gave a physical description of the Lord. Surely if God desired the use of pictures of Christ to further the cause of Christ He would have had a physical description of His Son in His Word. Why should we consider ourselves wiser than God and provide what He has deliberately left out?

The second amazing fact is that in the first four centuries of the history of the Church no picture of Christ was used. These were the years when the Church made her most astonishing growth. These were the years in which the Christians conquered Pagan Rome. It is so frequently stated that we need pictures of Christ in order to teach people the Gospel. The apostle Peter did not need pictures of Christ to instruct the young or bring the Gospel to adults. The apostle John did not need pictures of Christ to convert pagans and instruct the Church. The apostle Paul did not need pictures of Christ to convert Barbarians and Greeks. The early church did not need pictures of Christ to conquer paganism. They accomplished it by preaching the Word in the power of the Holy Spirit.

When pictures of Christ were first introduced they were opposed. The Church historian Eusebius, who lived in the fourth century, declared himself in the strongest manner against images of Christ in a letter to the Empress Constantia who asked him for such an image. Amongst other things Eusebius wrote: *“Who can therefore counterfeit by dead and insensible colors, by vain shadowing painter’s art, the bright and shining glistering of such His glory? whereas His holy Disciples were not able to behold the same in the mountain; who, therefore, falling on their faces, acknowledged they were not able to behold such a sight.”*

Here Eusebius touches on one of the reasons why it is impossible to have a true picture of Christ. If you want a picture of Christ do you want it as He was upon earth or as He is now in heaven? If you want a picture of Him as He was upon earth you have quite a problem. There was no picture of Him painted. The so-called pictures of Christ which are present today are from the imaginations of the artists. That is why there are so many different pictures. Not one of them is a true picture. So every time you say this or that is a picture of Christ you are uttering a lie. You cannot teach truth by a lie. Christ is the Truth and surely He would not want the use of a false means to point to Him. Christ abhors lies and falsehoods.

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 willworship. 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.

Thirdly, the second commandment forbids bowing down to an image or likeness of anything in heaven above, or in the earth beneath, or that is in the water under the earth. A picture of the Saviour purports to be a representation or likeness of him who is now in heaven or, at least, of him when he sojourned upon the earth. It is plainly forbidden, therefore, to bow down in worship before such a representation or likeness. This exposes the iniquity involved in the practice of exhibiting pictorial representations of the Saviour in places of worship. When we worship before a picture of our Lord, whether it be in the form of a mural, or on canvas, or in stained glass, we are doing what the second commandment expressly forbids. This is rendered all the more apparent when we bear in mind that the only reason why a picture of him should be exhibited in a place is the supposition that it contributes to the worship of him who is our Lord. The practice only demonstrates how insensitive we readily become to the commandments of God and to the inroads of idolatry. May the Churches of Christ be awake to the deceptive expedients by which the archenemy ever seeks to corrupt the worship of the Saviour.

In summary, what is at stake in this question is the unique place which Jesus Christ as the God-man occupies in our faith and worship and the unique place which the Scripture occupies as the only revelation, the only medium of communication, respecting him whom we worship as Lord and Saviour. The incarnate Word and the written Word are correlative. We dare not use other media of impression or of sentiment but those of his institution and prescription. Every thought and impression of him should evoke worship. We worship him with the Father and the Holy Spirit, one God. To use a likeness of Christ as an aid to worship is forbidden by the second commandment as much in this case as in that of the Father and Spirit.

Without doubt the disciples in the days of his flesh had a vivid mental image of Jesus' appearance and they could not but have retained that recollection to the end of their days. They could never have entertained the thought of him as he had sojourned with them without something of that mental image and they could not have entertained it without adoration and worship. The very features which they remembered would have been part and parcel of their conception of him and reminiscent of what he had been to them in his humiliation and in the glory of his resurrection appearance. Much more might be said regarding the significance for the disciples of Jesus' physical features.

Jesus is also glorified in the body and that body is visible. It will also become visible to us at his glorious appearing - "he will be seen the second time without sin by those who look for him unto salvation" (Hebrews 9:28).

What then are we to say of pictures of Christ? First of all, it must be said that we have no data whatsoever on the basis of which to make a pictorial representation; we have no descriptions of his physical features which would enable even the most accomplished artist to make an approximate portrait.

In view of the profound influence exerted by a picture, especially on the minds of young people, we should perceive the peril involved in a portrayal for which there is no warrant, a portrayal which is the creation of pure imagination. It may help to point up the folly to ask: what would be the reaction of a disciple, who had actually seen the Lord in the days of his flesh, to a portrait which would be the work of imagination on the part of one who had never seen the Saviour? We can readily detect what his recoil would be. No impression we have of Jesus should be created without the proper revelatory data, and every impression, every thought, should evoke worship. Hence, since we possess no revelatory data for a picture or portrait in the proper sense of the term, we are precluded from making one or using any that have been made.

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

How would you like it if someone who never saw you painted a picture and told every one that it was a picture of you? Certainly you would resent it. And certainly Christ must resent all those counterfeit pictures of Him.

But supposing you wanted a picture of Christ as He is now. The Disciples had such a vision of Him on the mount of transfiguration. We read in Matthew 17:2, "***And his face did shine as the sun, and his raiment was white as the light.***" This was the glorified Christ. **No artist could give us a picture of Christ which would show the glowing of Christ's face as the sun and his raiment as white as the light.** They would only rob Christ of His glory by miserably falling short of a true painting of Christ in His present glory.

But someone will state that at least we can depict the humanity of Christ as He appeared upon earth. But who are we to separate His humanity from His divinity! The apostle John states in his Gospel, chapter 1:14, "***And the Word was made flesh, and dwelt among us, (and we beheld his glory, the glory as of the only begotten of the Father,) full of grace and truth.***" Notice that the apostle states that even while Christ was in the flesh they beheld His glory, the glory as of the only begotten of the Father. In other words, they beheld His divinity as well as His humanity. This one cannot paint. So one must behold His humanity as separate from His divinity. Then one falls into the ancient error of Nestorius. He stated that Christ consisted of two persons: one human and the other divine. There was, according to Nestorius, a separation between the human and the divine persons.

That was the ground on which the Council called by Constantine V condemned paintings of Christ. You see this question of pictures of Christ was the subject of controversy throughout the eighth century. So Constantine called a council in 753 of three hundred and thirty bishops. Their conclusion was this: "***If any person shall divide the human nature, united to the Person of God the Word; and, having it only in the imagination of his mind, shall therefore, attempt to paint the same in an Image; let him be holden as accursed. If any person shall divide Christ, being but one, into two persons; placing on the one side the Son of God, and on the other side the son of Mary; neither doth confess the continual union that is made; and by that reason doth paint in an Image the son of Mary, as subsisting by himself; let him be accursed. If any person shall paint in an Image the human nature, being deified by the uniting thereof to God the Word; separating the same as it were from the Godhead assumed and deified; let him be holden as accursed.***"

This council points out the difficulty and indeed the impossibility of painting a portrait of Christ. Christ is more than man. He is God-man. It is impossible to depict by a painter's brush the almighty power of Christ; the glorious majesty of Christ; the infinite knowledge of Christ. You cannot localize by a painter's brush the everywhere presence of Christ. One can only succeed in degrading Christ. When one considers the deity of Christ it is no wonder that the apostles did not attempt a physical description of their Lord and Saviour.

There is always, also, the danger of worshipping the picture of Christ and attaching power to it. Even a Protestant publishing firm stated that there is power in a picture of Christ. It stated: "When one plants deeply and firmly in his mind the picture of Christ, it has a strong and powerful influence in his life." Thus instead of attributing this influence to Christ and the Holy Spirit they attribute it to the picture they are trying to sell. That is a breaking of the second commandment.

But can it not help in the saving of souls, it is asked. But how? Looking at a picture of Christ hanging upon the cross tells me nothing. It does not tell me that He hung there for sin. It does not tell me that He hung there for my sin. It does not tell me that He is the Son of God. Only the Word of God does that. And it is the Word of God that has been given us to tell the story of salvation through the blood of Christ. It is not through the foolishness of pictures that sinners are converted but through the foolishness of preaching.

It is amazing how—slowly—unscriptural practices enter the Christian Church. We must at all times go back to the Scriptures. The Bible is our infallible guide. And if our practices and doctrines do not conform with the teachings of the Scriptures *then* we must eliminate them. The Bible instructs the Church not to make any likeness of Christ. The present day pictures of Christ are false and no one would make a serious claim that they resemble Christ upon earth. They separate His humanity from His deity. They do not at all give us a glimpse of His present glory. They are not condoned by the inspired apostles.

God has ordained the foolishness of preaching to evangelize the world. He has promised to attend the preaching of the Word with the power of the Holy Spirit. The so-called pictures of Christ are a hindrance and a temptation to idolatry. Let us cleanse the Temple of God from them.

PICTURES OF CHRIST

by

Professor John Murray

The question of the propriety of pictorial representations of the Saviour is one that merits examination. It must be granted that the worship of Christ is central in our holy faith, and the thought of the Saviour must in every instance be accompanied with that reverence which belongs to his worship. We cannot think of him without the apprehension of the majesty that is his. If we do not entertain the sense of his majesty, then we are guilty of impiety and we dishonor him.

It will also be granted that the only purpose that could properly be served by a pictorial representation is that it would convey to us some thought or lesson representing him, consonant with truth and promotive of worship. Hence the question is inescapable: is a pictorial representation a legitimate way of conveying truth regarding him and of contributing to the worship which this truth should evoke?

We are all aware of the influence exerted on the mind and heart by pictures. Pictures are powerful media of communication. How suggestive they are for good or for evil and all the more so when accompanied by the comment of the spoken or written word! It is futile, therefore, to deny the influence exerted upon mind and heart by a picture of Christ. And if such is legitimate, the influence exerted should be one constraining to worship and adoration. To claim any lower aim as that served by a picture of the Saviour would be contradiction of the place which he must occupy in thought, affection, and honor.

The plea for the propriety of pictures of Christ is based on the fact that he was truly man, that he had a human body, that he was visible in his human nature to the physical senses, and that a picture assists us to take in the stupendous reality of his incarnation, in a word, that he was made in the likeness of men and was found in fashion as a man.

Our Lord had a true body. He could have been photographed. A portrait could have been made of him and, if a good portrait, it would have reproduced his likeness.