

2<sup>nd</sup> Idolatry and Rome  
Study for discussion on May 18

1A. Aaron's calf (Ex. 32.4-5) and the Reformation versus Rome

**Exodus 32:4 And he received the gold from their hand and fashioned it with a graving tool and made a golden calf. And they said, "These are your gods [אֱלֹהֵינוּ אֲשֶׁר בְּרָאנוּ, your God] , O Israel, who brought you up out of the land of Egypt!"**

Thus, the point here is that *the golden calf is your God* that brought you out of Egypt. Accordingly, Aaron put an altar in front of the statue of the golden calf stating that by the use of this calf they will feast unto the Lord: **Exodus 32:5 When Aaron saw this, he built an altar before it. And Aaron made proclamation and said, "Tomorrow shall be a feast to the LORD."** This feast is to the covenant God of the fathers. In other words, the golden calf was a means by which to worship the Lord of the covenant. This is precisely what God forbids, using an idol or statue in worshipping Him (likewise, in Jeroboam's day, 1 Ki. 12.28).

The charge from the reformed tradition is not that Rome worships statues. Instead, the charge is that Rome breaks God's commandment (the 2<sup>nd</sup>) by using statues in the worship of God and as part of the context of the worship of God as the Council of Trent states: "we through the images which we kiss...or bend the knee, adore Christ and venerate the saints, whom they represent."

Without question, Roman practice includes kissing images and bending the knee before statues. They bow down to them, but of course, Catholics claim that it is through the images and by kneeling before them that they adore Christ and venerate the saints. In this way, Rome argues in parallel fashion with pagans who similarly defend their worship before, say, a Buddha image, that that image simply transfers them in thought to their true object of worship.

2A. On clarity in worship

Some think that the Catholic Church during the Council of Trent (1545-1563) issued a clear statement concerning images and statues. According to the 25th Session of this General Council:

The images of Christ and of the Virgin Mother of God, and of the saints are to be had and retained particularly in churches, and due honor and veneration are to be given them; not that any divinity or virtue is believed to be in them on account of which they are to be worshipped, or that anything is to be asked of them, or that trust is to be reposed in images, as was of old by the Gentiles, who placed their hopes in idols; but because the honor which is shown them is referred to the prototypes which these images represent; so that we through the images which we kiss...or bend the knee, adore Christ and venerate the saints, whom they represent. [The Canons & Decrees of the Council of Trent (TAN Books, 1978) p. 215-6]

There are some serious problems.

1) Bowing before them

Notably, members kiss the statues and kneel before them in the context of corporate church worship. Kneeling before a king as in honoring David or bowing to the Queen of England or standing when the President of the US enters a room are not acts done in order to worship God through these means; these are acts of honoring men, which Scripture commands. Is the worship of God a matter of clear practice when the same acts (kneeling, kissing) in the same place (in the gathering of professing Christians to worship God) give worship to Christ and simply veneration or respect to Mary and the saints? This is difficult when the explanation states: "The movement toward the image does not terminate in it as image, but tends toward that whose image it is" (RCC, 1992, 71). Thus, we move in thought to, and bend the knee before, Mary and the saints! This is confusing to say the least.

## 2) Worshipping the dead

Adding to the confusion of worship is the fact that Mary and dead saints are elevated in ways that Scripture nowhere prescribes for the dead. More importantly, do not the people pray to Mary and the dead saints? Is prayer not a biblical mode of worshipping God?

## 3) Idolatry and superstition

This shows the close tie to the first commandment: using idols and statues as helps in the worship of God lead worshippers away from worshipping the Creator to worshipping the creature (angels, Mary, the saints, etc.). Compare, ironically, what Rome says on superstition: "Superstition is a departure from the worship that we give to the true God. It is manifested in idolatry as well as in various forms of divination and magic" (Catechism, 1992, 2138).

## 4) Rationale and *sola scriptura*

The rationale for the prohibition is the Creator-creature distinction and the transcendence of God. No image can properly represent Him; *therefore, He must tell us how to worship Him* and He says that we are not to approach Him through the use of statues and images of Him.

## 5) New economy of images

Claiming the incarnation of Christ and the centrality of the cross do not modify this prohibition (cf. par.2141, 1992 Catholic Catechism, "The veneration of sacred images is based on the mystery of the Incarnation of the Word of God. It is not contrary to the first commandment"; so, 2131, the Son of God introduced a new "economy" of images).

However, the figure of a man on the cross does not properly represent the God-man who died for sinners and was raised from the dead. Moreover, we glory in the cross when we proclaim its message. Again, the sufficiency of Scripture is compromised by adding statuary helps for worship to the word that is our sufficient guide.

## Two Concluding Implications

### 1) Ex. 32.4-5 the image is your god

The bond of the image with God suggests that God views the use of such aids as a departure from worshipping Him: so that use involves worshipping the creature instead of the Creator. The use of images to worship God is the worship of the carved things as far as God is concerned. In other words, if this is not worshipping Him, then the only thing left is the idol, which shows the folly: we worship things that cannot see, hear, or respond. We may know that that is foolish; but that is what we do when we use carved images as aids in the worship of God. Thus, prayer through a statue of Christ, Mary, or a saint goes to the statue and no farther!

### 2) Sin and promoting sin

It is a sin to worship God by using some image of God as is done in the use of a crucifix to worship Jesus. Furthermore, all the commandments involve the principle that we sin against the commandments if we do not promote their true spirit and intent in ourselves and others (for example, from the Sermon on the Mount: we are to curb anger in ourselves and others if we are going to obey the 6<sup>th</sup> commandment, Mat. 6.21-26). We must expose the sin and promote obedience as part of our witness for Christ in every way we are able.