

2nd 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!"

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 2nd) 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 [*or reflection*].

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. [*Does the worship/veneration distinction help? No, both mean love, adore, reverence, and so forth*]

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? [**Bowing before a saint elevates to deity & breaks 1st**]

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.

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" [**& 2nd**]; 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!

It is worshipping the creature instead of the Creator!

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 6th commandment, Mat. 6.21-26).

Mat. 6.21-26 shows the depth true spirit and intent of the law of God. Jesus gives us insight as to how to approach and apply the law in its depth. That includes the promotion of commandment keeping in ourselves and in others

We must expose the sin and promote obedience as part of our witness for Christ in every way we are able.

How do we do this in practical ways? Here are some suggestions:

1) Must have love and wisdom-this is first a prayer, but action too because sin harms; silence contributes to the harm.

2) Timing-in wisdom we must be sensitive to the need of the moment

3) Call it what it is, sin, with concerned explanation; not sniping but showing by OMH in dialogue where possible.

Summary discussion on the second commandment

1) There are *two points in the command to distinguish*: Exodus 20:4-5 a) "You shall not make for yourself a 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. b) ⁵ You shall not bow down to them or serve them.

First, all representations of God dishonor Him. This surely has to be the point at issue when the commandment speaks about carved images or any likeness of *anything* (anything created wherever found, heaven, earth, sea). That is, the command forbids making any likeness of God because there is no form in the creation that "duplicates" the Creator. Thus, the Lord is telling us that such will lead us away from Him in a loss of the Creator-creature distinction.

Second, then, an additional point is the use of any such image as a means of worshipping God by bowing before it.

For both these points note the rationale point above:

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.

Again, no image can properly represent him so none is to be made of Him *and* He tells us we are not to approach Him through the use of statues and images.

2) Now in the history of redemption we have the teaching about Christ and His true humanity. Does the 2nd apply to Christ who had a physical form (by contrast: Deut. 4, "you saw no form")? Is it not the case that all attempts to give an exact representation fail since we have no knowledge of his physical appearance and more importantly, none can convey the God-man?

Yes, *at least provisionally* we can state that the point still holds: we are to make no images of God and Jesus is God. The fact that He had a human form that people saw might allow for "stick" figures or generic representations in Christian education because Jesus had a physical form. A stick figure or faceless cartoon-like image are not attempts to replicate a form of Him; they do not seek to picture what He looked like as an individual man; they do not try to picture His wholeness as both God and man (cf. Clowney, 32; this whole area merits more thought and discussion. In this line of thought, artists may sincerely use their art to try to glorify Christ but it is wrong to paint, sculpture, and visually replicate (on film) images of Him.

3) Most importantly, we have the picture of Christ (Himself and His crucifixion) that the Scriptures give us: do we not displace Scripture by the various images in art and film? This brings us back to the primacy of the word, *sola scriptura* and the primacy of preaching the 66 books no more and no less.

The matter of commandment keeping, works, and justification

Paul in Galatians speaks of another gospel that is not another (chapters 1-2). Then he tells us what this false gospel is: Galatians 2:16 ¹⁶ **yet we know that a person is not justified by works of the law but through faith in Jesus Christ, so we also have believed in Christ Jesus, in order to be justified by faith in Christ and not by works of the law, because by works of the law no one will be justified. Justification is by faith and not by works. One cannot trust in Christ plus works and have justification; that is another gospel, which is not another: faith must be in Christ alone.**