

REFORMATION 500 WEEK 35: HEIDELBERG CATECHISM QA'S 96-98

Question 96: WHAT DOES GOD REQUIRE IN THE SECOND COMMANDMENT? **That we in no way make any image of God, nor worship Him in any other way than He has commanded us in His Word.**

In the first commandment, the true God commanded that He alone should be worshipped. In the second commandment, He requires us to worship Him in a way that “is pleasing to Him, and not with such worship as that which is according to the imagination and device of man [Acts 17:29]” (Ursinus, 517). When the Israelites made the golden calf, they were not intending to worship another god, but rather they proclaimed “a feast to the LORD [Yahweh]” (Ex. 32:5). They worshiped the LORD with an image. Having spent over 400 years in Egyptian bondage, the Israelites got the idea of making a bull from the Egyptians who thought the bull was a good representation of divine power. Like all pagans, they believed that by honoring the image, the god’s power and blessing would flow to them from the image. Listen to the pagans as they speak for themselves: ‘who but a perfect child considers these idols to be gods?’ ‘Rather, we worship the gods by them.’ ‘I worship not this visible thing, but the divinity dwelling there invisibly.’ (quoted by Turretin, 2:55).

The LORD repeatedly warned Israel not to worship Him the way the other nations did (Deut. 12:2-4, 29-32). “You shall not worship the Lord your God in that way.... Whatever I command you, be careful to observe it; you shall not add to it nor take away from it” (Deut. 12:31-32; cf. 1 Cor. 10:20). God has not left us free to worship Him as we think best. God has revealed what pleases Him in Scripture (Matt. 15:9). For this reason, our love to God through Jesus Christ should lead us to worship Him the way He requires in Scripture. “God is Spirit, and those who worship Him must worship in spirit and truth [sincerely in accord with the truth of His Word]” (John 4:24).

The reason why images of God are forbidden is because God *cannot* be imaged. God is infinite, “the heaven of heavens cannot contain” Him (1 Kings 8:27). “God is Spirit” (John 4:24), “dwelling in unapproachable light, whom no man has seen nor can see” (1 Tim. 6:16; cf. Ex. 33:20; John 1:18). “To whom then will you compare God? Or what *likeness* will you compare to Him?” (Isa. 40:18). Therefore, “you shall not make any *likeness* of anything...” (Ex. 20:4). All images of God are lies and detract from His glory (Hab. 2:18).

What about pictures of Jesus? Jesus said, “all should honor the Son just as they honor the Father” (John 5:23). If it is wrong to make an image of God the Father it is equally wrong to make an image of God the Son! He is not just a man. He is also infinite God. “No man ever spoke like this Man!” There was no attempt by the apostles to make a portrait of Jesus, or to put on a passion play (cf. 2 Cor. 5:16; Rev. 1:14-16)! When pictures of Christ were first introduced they were condemned by the church fathers. The Council of Elvira (AD 306) declared: “there ought not to be images in a church, that what is worshipped and adored should not be depicted on the walls.” As late as AD 754, the 7th ecumenical council decreed “no images of Christ should be painted or graven, not even as it respects His human nature; because nothing but His humanity could be expressed by art; and those who make such images, seem to establish again the error of Nestorius, or Eutyches” (Ursinus, 527).

The reformation sought to return to the basic principles of worship as practiced in the early church, which was modeled after the Jewish synagogue. “The first Christians [were Jewish believers and] took over many of the worship traditions of the synagogue. They did not take over the rich and sumptuous ceremonial of the Temple, but rather the simpler synagogue service, with its Scripture reading, its sermon, its prayers, and its psalmody” (Hughes Oliphant Old, *Worship*, 43). The “highest worship of God is to hear Him speaking by human lips, and to yield subjection to His Word” (Calvin). “The best and true ornament of our churches is the pure and unadulterated doctrine of the gospel, the lawful use of the sacraments, true prayer, and worship in accordance with God’s Word” (Ursinus, 533).

Question 97: MAY WE NOT MAKE ANY IMAGE AT ALL? **God may not and cannot be imaged in any way; as for creatures, though they may indeed be imaged, yet God forbids the making or keeping of any likeness of them, either to worship them or to serve God by them.**

The Second Commandment “does not absolutely forbid us to make, or to have images, likenesses and statues, because the art of painting, sculpture, casting and embroidery, is reckoned among the gifts of God which are good and profitable to human life, and God Himself had certain images placed in the tabernacle (Ex. 31:3; 35:30) and Solomon had upon his throne images of lions, and had figures of palm-trees and cherubim carved upon the walls of the temple by the command of God (1 Kings 6:23, 29; 10:19-20)” (Ursinus, 526). But those images were part of the structure, not part of the worship, of the temple; and they passed away with the passing away of OT worship. God does not want us to use man-made religious images in our worship of Him. God has given us images of His own choosing: baptism and the Lord’s Supper. Not even a cross is to be considered a sacred symbol. If you want to have a cross for decoration, or wear one around your neck, that’s fine, just so long as you don’t superstitiously think that a cross is necessary for a person or a Church to be Christian.

Question 98: BUT MAY NOT PICTURES BE TOLERATED IN CHURCHES AS BOOKS FOR THE PEOPLE? **No, for we should not be wiser than God, who will not have His people taught by dumb idols, but by the lively preaching of His Word.**

The Medieval Church used pictures, statues and relics, rather than the Bible, to instruct its members. The reformers learned from the Bible that the way to instruct people concerning Christ is to preach Christ to them from the Bible and to teach them to read the Bible for themselves. “Preach the Word!” (2 Tim. 4:2). A picture of a man hanging on a cross tells you nothing about who the man was or why he’s hanging there or why we need to believe in him. Pictures do not teach truths. This is why they are called dumb idols. Only words can convey truth. Faith does not come from looking at images, but by the *hearing* of the word of God (Rom. 10:17). It is the *message* not the *image* of the cross that brings salvation. “For the message of the cross is foolishness to those who are perishing, but to us who are being saved it is the power of God” (1 Cor. 1:18); “it pleased God through the *foolishness* of the message preached to save those who believe...because the

foolishness of God is wiser than men” (1 Cor. 1:21, 25). **REFORMATION 500**

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