

Pictorial Representations of Christ, A Brief Study

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Exodus 20:4-6: ⁴Thou shalt not make unto thee any graven image, or any likeness of any thing that is in heaven above, or that is in the earth beneath, or that is in the water under the earth: ⁵Thou shalt not bow down thyself to them, nor serve them: 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; ⁶And shewing mercy unto thousands of them that love me, and keep my commandments.¹

Westminster Larger Catechism Question 109: What are the Sins Forbidden in the Second Commandment?

Answer: The sins forbidden in the second commandment are, all devising,^a counseling,^b commanding,^c using,^d and any wise approving, any religious worship not instituted by God himself;^e tolerating a false religion;^f 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;^g all worshipping of it,^h or God in it or by it;ⁱ the making of any representation of feigned deities,^j and all worship of them, or service belonging to them;^k all superstitious devices,^l corrupting the worship of God,^m adding to it, or taking from it,ⁿ whether invented and taken up of ourselves,^o or received by tradition from others,^p though under the title of antiquity,^q custom,^r devotion,^s good intent, or any other pretence whatsoever;^t simony;^u sacrilege;^v all neglect,^w contempt,^x hindering,^y and opposing the worship and ordinances which God hath appointed.^z

a. Numb. 15:39.

b. Deut. 13:6–8.

c. Hosea 5:11; Micah 6:16.

d. 1 Ki. 11:33; 12:33.

e. Deut. 12:30–32.

f. Deut. 13:6–12; Zech. 13:2–3; Rev. 2:2, 14–15, 20; 17:12, 16–17.

g. Deut. 4:15–19; Acts 17:29; Rom. 1:21–23, 25.

h. Dan. 3:18; Gal. 4:8.

i. Exod. 32:5.

j. Exod. 32:8.

k. 1 Ki. 18:26, 28; Isa. 65:11.

l. Acts 17:22; Col. 2:21–23.

m. Mal. 1:7–8, 14.

n. Deut. 4:2.

o. Ps. 106:39.

p. Matt. 15:9.

q. 1 Pet. 1:18.

r. Jer. 44:17.

s. Isa. 65:3–5; Gal. 1:13–14.

t. 1 Sam. 13:11–12; 15:21.

u. Acts 8:18.

v. Rom. 2:22; Mal. 3:8.

w. Exod 4:24–26.

x. Matt. 22:5; Mal. 1:7, 13.

y. Matt. 23:13.

z. Acts 13:44–45; 1 Thess. 2:15–16.

The history of Reformed and Presbyterian Churchmen and Christians, as it pertains to the use, or the approval of pictorial representations of Christ, from the days of the Reformation in the British Isles and the penning of the Westminster Standards is a matter of settled history. The quotation from the Larger Catechism above, question 109, presents clearly that our fathers understood that making a representation of “any or of all of the three persons” of the Godhead is forbidden. However, there are voices today calling for a reevaluation of that historical landmark when it comes to pictorial or artistic representations of the Second Person of the Trinity, our Lord Jesus Christ, depicting supposed and/or artistic scenes from his earthly ministry during the time of His incarnation. These voices have called for the use of such artistic representations for different reasons—for didactic-historical, and didactic-theological reasons, among others, as well as simply the pleasures of artistic expression.

The aim of this paper is not to offend, nor unduly to confront, but to look at the arguments from Scripture, and in so doing, to understand the monolithic testimony of our faithful fathers as they believed pictorial representations of Christ to be forbidden by the second commandment.

At the beginning of our argument, we acknowledge with our confessional statements that our Lord Jesus Christ

¹ *The Holy Bible: King James Version.*, electronic ed. of the 1769 edition of the 1611 Authorized Version. (Bellingham WA: Logos Research Systems, Inc., 1995), Ex 20:4–6. (All Bible quotations are from the Authorized Version.)

had a true body and a reasonable soul², such that while He was on the earth, if cameras had been available, He could have been photographed. He ate, drank, slept, occupied space, etc. like other men, for he was (and is as glorified³) fully human. The denial of the propriety of the use of pictorial representations of Christ is not a denial of His true humanity. The Apostles had a true recollection of the physical nature of Christ—His stature, skin color, body composition, etc. that could be remembered, and thought upon. Let it not be said that those who adhere more closely to the historical practice of denying the propriety of the use of images of Christ during the days of His incarnation are in some way sub-orthodox regarding a Biblical Christology. We affirm, as did our fathers, that Christ is God-man.

That our fathers held to the impropriety of images of Christ is not in question, and as was mentioned above, is simply a matter of recorded history in their writings. Suffice these few quotations:

Hear Thomas Ridgley in his comments on Larger Catechism 109:

It is farther inquired whether we may not describe our Saviour, as he sometimes is by the Papists, in those things which respect his human nature? whether we may not portray him as an infant in his mother's arms, or as conversing on earth, or hanging on the cross? The Papists not only describe him thus, but adore the image or representation of Christ crucified, which they call a crucifix. But whatever of Christ comes within the reach of the art of man to delineate or describe, is only his human nature, which is not the object of divine adoration; so that the practice of describing him in the way mentioned tends rather to debase, than to give us raised and becoming conceptions of him as such.⁴

Thomas Vincent, commenting on Shorter Catechism 51 declares:

Question 6: Is it not lawful to have pictures of Jesus Christ, he being a man as well as God?

Answer: It is not lawful to have pictures of Jesus Christ, because his divine nature cannot be pictured at all; and because his body, as it is now glorified, cannot be pictured as it is; and because, if it do not stir up devotion, it is in vain; if it stir up devotion, it is a worshipping by an image or picture, and so a palpable breach of the second commandment.⁵

Thomas Watson, commenting on the second commandment says it this way:

QUEST. 1. *If it be not lawful to make the image of God the Father, yet may we not make an image of Christ, who took upon him the nature of man?*

Ans. No. Epiphanius seeing an image of Christ hanging in a church, brake it in pieces. It is Christ's Godhead, united to his manhood that makes him to be Christ; therefore to picture his manhood, when we cannot picture his Godhead, is a sin, because we make him to be but half Christ,—we separate what God hath joined,—we leave out that which is the chief thing, which makes him to be Christ.⁶

John Owen aptly sets forth the Puritan doctrine of the representation of Christ in the Gospel, and in forbidding of images:

It is a general notion of truth, that *the Lord Christ, in his person and grace, is to be proposed and represented unto men as the principal object of their faith and love.*

He himself, in his Divine Person, is absolutely invisible unto us; and, as unto his human nature, absent from us; for the heaven must receive him “until the times of restitution of all things.” There must [be], therefore, an image or representation of him be made unto our minds, or he cannot be the proper object of our faith, trust, love, and delight. This is done in the gospel, and the preaching of it; for therein he is

² See Larger Catechism Q. 37

³ See Larger Catechism Q. 36

⁴ Thomas Ridgley, *A Body of Divinity*, vol. 2 (New York: Robert Carter & Brothers, 1855), 333.

⁵ Thomas Vincent, *A Family Instructional Guide*, electronic edition based on the first Banner of Truth ed., 1980. (Simpsonville, SC: Christian Classics Foundation, 1996), 126.

⁶ Thomas Watson, *The Select Works of the Rev. Thomas Watson, Comprising His Celebrated Body of Divinity, in a Series of Lectures on the Shorter Catechism, and Various Sermons and Treatises* (New York: Robert Carter & Brothers, 1855), 253.

“evidently set forth” before our eyes, as “crucified amongst us,” Gal. 3:1. So, also, are all the other concerns of his person and offices therein clearly proposed unto us; yea, this is the principal end of the gospel,—namely, to make a due representation of the person, offices, grace, and glory of Christ unto the souls of men, that they may believe in him, and “believing, have eternal life,” John 20:31. Upon this representation made of Christ and his glory in the gospel, and the preaching of it, believers have an experience of the power and efficacy of the divine truth contained therein, in the way before mentioned, as the apostle declares, 2 Cor. 3:18, for “we all, with open face beholding as in a glass the glory of the Lord, are changed into the same image from glory to glory, even as by the Spirit of the Lord.” Having a spiritual fight to discern and behold the glory of Christ, as represented in the glass of the gospel, they have experience of its transforming power and efficacy, changing them into the likeness of the image represented unto them,—that is, of Christ himself; which is the saving effect of gospel power. But this *spiritual light* was lost among men, through the efficacy of their darkness and unbelief; they were not able to discover the glory of Christ, as revealed and proposed in the gospel, so as to make him the present object of their faith and love. And this light being lost, they could have no *experience* of the power of divine truth concerning him changing them into his image. They could make no *affecting* discovery of him in the Scripture. All things therein were dark and confused, or at least seemed an inaccessible mystery, which they could not reduce to practice. Hence, those who had got the public conduct of religion drove the people from reading the Scripture, as that which was of no use, but rather dangerous unto them. What shall these men, then, betake themselves unto? Shall they reject the notion in general, that there ought to be *such a representation made of Christ unto the minds of men*, as to inflame their devotion, to excite their faith, and stir up their affection to him? This cannot be done without an open renunciation of him, and of the gospel as a fable. Wherefore they will find out another way for it,—another means unto the same end;—and this is, by making *images of him* of wood and stone, or gold and silver, or painting on them. Hereby they supposed he would be made present unto his worshippers;—that he would be so represented unto them, as that they should be immediately stirred up unto the embraces of faith and love. And herein they found sensible effects, unto their great satisfaction; for their minds being dark, carnal, and prone to superstition,—as are the minds of all men by nature,—they could see nothing in the spiritual representation of him in the gospel that had any power on them, or did in any measure affect them. In these images, by the means of sight and imagination, they found that which did really work upon their affections, and, as they thought, did excite them unto the love of Christ.⁷

And finally, hear from a modern theologian, Professor John Murray:

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 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 will worship. 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.⁸

While we appreciate the work of our Reformed predecessors, and are reluctant to overturn landmarks lightly, these questions must be answered by the Scriptures, and not by historical testimony. As we move forward, we will examine the Biblical arguments of those who argue for the propriety of the use of images of Christ, during the days of His incarnation, as didactic tools or artistic expression.

⁷ John Owen, *The Works of John Owen*, ed. William H. Goold, vol. 8 (Edinburgh: T&T Clark, n.d.), 551–553.

⁸ John Murray, printed in the *Reformed Herald*, vol. 16, no. 9 (February 1961), and from *The Presbyterian Reformed Magazine*, vol. 7, no. 4 (Winter 1993)

The first argument advanced by our brethren is that while the second commandment pertains forbidding to any purported image of God, what is being depicted in an image of Christ is simply His “human nature” and so is not forbidden in the commandment.

This argument of our brethren fails on the following fronts:

1. First, it is not possible rightly to separate the human and divine natures of Christ united in the hypostatic union.
 - a. While we do distinguish the natures, we understand that they are inseparably and eternally brought together in the Person of Christ. When the proponents of the use of images of Christ’s incarnate human nature speak of depicting “only the human nature” they work against the Scripture doctrine of the hypostatic union, and the proper understanding of the *communicatio idiomatum*. It is the language of the Scripture to speak of Christ in the unity of His Person in such a way that the attributes of one of Christ’s natures are spoken of as applicable to the other nature, by virtue of the unity of His theanthropic Person.

Acts 20.28: ²⁸ Take heed therefore unto yourselves, and to all the flock, over the which the Holy Ghost hath made you overseers, to feed the church of God, which he hath purchased with his own blood.
 - b. Note in this passage that the Scriptures unite the natures of Christ in such a way so as to say that His blood, which was human blood, was in this nomenclature, divine—the blood of God. This is not to confess that God has become material, or that the human nature of Christ was somehow mingled with the divine nature—nothing of the sort. It is however to emphasize the unity of the One Person of Christ, such that His blood, because he is God, is the “blood of God”. Hear the learned Calvin on this passage:
 - i. But because the speech which Paul useth seemeth to be somewhat hard, we must see in what sense he saith that God purchased the Church with his blood. For nothing is more absurd than to feign or imagine God to be mortal or to have a body. But in this speech he commendeth the unity of person in Christ; for because there be distinct natures in Christ, the Scripture doth sometimes recite that apart by itself which is proper to either. But when it setteth God before us made manifest in the flesh, it doth not separate the human nature from the Godhead. Notwithstanding, because again two natures are so united in Christ, that they make one person, that is improperly translated sometimes unto the one, which doth truly and in deed belong to the other, as in this place Paul doth attribute blood to God; because the man Jesus Christ, who shed his blood for us, was also God. This manner of speaking is called, of the old writers, *communicatio idiomatum*, because the property of the one nature is applied to the other.⁹
 - c. It is on this basis that the Apostle Peter speaks of the blood of Christ as the “precious blood of Christ” far above the value of “corruptible gold and silver”.¹⁰ In other words, the humanity of Christ is not separated, in Scripture-language, from His divinity. Rather, we have these and other instances which speak against such diminishing of the unity of the theanthropic Person. When our brethren speak of picturing “only the humanity of Christ” we must object to this manner of speaking as being contrary to the Scripture-practice of drawing together the humanity and divinity of Christ under the unity of His Person.
2. This argument also fails upon the testimony of the Apostles themselves, as they beheld Christ. We hear from our brethren that the Apostles would have retained an image in their mind of the “human nature of Christ”, and that our understanding of the Second commandment convicts them as sinners for this retention. In response, there are a few matters to bring to bear from the Scriptures.

⁹ John Calvin and Henry Beveridge, *Commentary upon the Acts of the Apostles*, vol. 2 (Bellingham, WA: Logos Bible Software, 2010), 256–257.

¹⁰ 1 Peter 1.18-20, 1 Peter 2.4-7

- a. The first assertion against this argument is that as Reformed Christians, we understand that ability does not dictate morality. If the Apostles “could not help themselves” from forming an image of Christ in their minds, and yet the second commandment forbids it, any mental image would be sin, regardless of the creature’s ability or inability to obey. This argument is important because our reformed understanding of the objectivity of the Lord’s commands to us, regardless of our inability, has come under fire in recent days. It is not uncommon to hear, “it’s impossible not to form an image of Christ in the mind—therefore this cannot be forbidden”. As those who believe in total depravity, and in the remnants of corruption in the regenerate, let us settle it in our minds that ability does not dictate morality. Hear the Larger Catechism on this:
 Question 149: Is Any Man Able Perfectly to Keep the Commandments of God?
 Answer: No man is able, either of himself,^a or by any grace received in this life, perfectly to keep the commandments of God;^b but doth daily break them, in thought,^c word, and deed.^d
- b. However, we deny that this mental conception of the Apostles and others would have been sin to them, because of the way they speak of their recollection of Christ in Scripture (see below) and because of their unique historical perspective of living with Christ, being taught by Him, having Him present with them during the days of His incarnation, after His resurrection and before His ascension. They had something we do not have—an historical experience with the incarnate Christ. There were times when this appearance of Christ was vigorous, other times weak, sometimes glorious and transfigured, other times injured as He suffered for us. There is His appearance as a boy, a young man, before and after His crucifixion, etc. All of these (and more) make up the “revelation of Christ” to the apostles’ senses. Are we to assume that they would have understood a propriety in depicting their incarnate Lord in any or all of these conditions? While they had a true and divinely originated memory of Him, (not a capricious creation) certainly their recollection of his appearance in all of these particulars would have been affected as all memories are, by imperfect humanity. But what do we have from these men? We have no images—we have the divinely inspired Scriptures, which give the Spirit-inspired and complete testimony concerning the God-man, Jesus Christ. Rather than an argument from silence, this is in keeping with the Sovereign Lord’s self-revelation to us, as He claims that right for Himself. Any pictorial representation of Christ is in some manner a revealing of Him; but apart from His own sovereignly directed self-revelation in the Holy Scripture, it must be rejected.
- c. The second assertion is from the testimony of the Apostles themselves. According to their inspired declarations, their experience of Christ was not limited to “a human nature”, such that their retention and conception of Him was “photographic” in the sense that an image could do justice to their understanding or remembrance.
- i. John 1.14: In this passage the Apostle John declares that the image of Christ they beheld was not merely a human nature, but that what they beheld was His flesh *and* His glory. In other words, their experience of Christ, the manner in which they knew Him, was as God-man, and not simply by the sight of His humanity. In looking upon His humanity, they beheld His glory—not with their eyes of course, but by taking into their understanding Christ, the God-man. This a picture cannot do.
 - ii. Certainly, there were physical aspects to their remembrance—the same Apostle makes that clear in 1 John 1.1-4. However, note that for John, this physical remembrance was not at all descriptive of the Christ he had known, and did know. For he goes on to describe that very one who “we have heard, which we have seen with our eyes, which we have looked upon, and our hands have handled” as the *Word of life* (a title that speaks of Christ’s divinity as much as His humanity). This is what the Apostle declared to us. While we in our age may be inclined to describe someone by his physical attributes of height, weight, hair color, etc. we have none of that from the Apostles. For John and the rest of the Apostles the conception of Christ cannot be separated into a conception of his human nature on the one hand, and then in another instant the conception of his divine nature.

He is always considered in the unity of His Person as God-man; that He, being divine, had taken to Himself a true body and a reasonable soul. We might add here that the Apostolic method of “manifesting that life” is by declaration, preaching, instruction, etc. and not by images.

iii. In addition, remember the testimony of the Apostle Paul (2 Corinthians 5.16-17)
¹⁶*Wherefore henceforth know we no man after the flesh: yea, though we have known Christ after the flesh, yet now henceforth know we him no more.* ¹⁷*Therefore if any man be in Christ, he is a new creature: old things are passed away; behold, all things are become new.*

1. There is a distinction to be drawn here from the knowledge of men after the flesh and the knowledge of Christ, for the knowledge of men being beyond that of knowing them merely in their flesh or bodily appearance does not approach a parity with Christ, the God-man. To declare that Christ is no longer known “according to the flesh” is to understand what the Apostle John said in the passages cited above—it is to know Christ as God, as well as man. This is obviously unique to Christ, and speaks to the detriment of those who would depict Him “after the flesh”.
2. However, when we consider the parallel between seeing a picture of a man and a purported picture of Christ we recognize the folly of saying that we “know” someone because we have seen them on the street as a casual observer of them. How then, if this is the case with men, can it be any different with Christ? Can we hope to have some “knowledge” of Christ by a picture? Is there something a picture reveals that nothing else can? Asked in this way, the answer is obvious. When, in the preaching of the Word, and in the administration of the sacraments Christ is presented to us, we can truly say that we “know” Him, not as casual observers, but as those invested with devotion toward His theanthropic Person.
3. To sum up this first section, picturing the “human nature” of Christ ought to be eschewed by those who believe in Christ, His theanthropic Person, because it is as that Person that He walked the earth, as that Person He lived without sin, as that Person performed miracles, as that Person He wrought salvation by the offering up of Himself, and as that Person He rose from the dead, instructed His disciples forty days, ascended into heaven, and makes continual intercession for us. It was by beholding that Person that the Apostles “beheld His glory”, and it was before that Person that many times during the days of His incarnation men fell down to worship. We do not mingle the natures of Christ by denying the propriety of images of his humanity, we simply believe, as the Apostles declared, that Christ cannot rightly be conceived of by a picture or statue of his human nature. When such images are used, do the beholders say of them, “Oh, what a lovely picture of the human nature of Christ”? Not at all, and frankly it would be sophistry to do so. Rather, they conceive of Christ, the God-man, and in so doing conceive of Christ in His divinity as well as His humanity, and thus the picture is rightly understood as a picture of God—this is how the Apostles remembered Christ, and it is precisely why a depiction of the humanity of Christ is forbidden to us, because it cannot be separated from his theanthropic Person.

The second argument advanced by our brethren is that the command forbidding the making and worshipping of images pertains to the fact that it was in the context of the Sinaitic legislation the Israelites were reminded:

“Take ye therefore good heed unto yourselves; for ye saw no manner of similitude on the day that the LORD spake unto you in Horeb out of the midst of the fire” (See Deuteronomy 4.12-18)

The argument of our brethren seems to proceed in this way: Seeing that the context in which the second commandment was given was a context in which there was no image of God provided for imitation, and the Lord purposely withheld any visible representation of Himself from the Israelites, the second commandment does not specifically apply to Christ, who did appear in human form, and was seen of many. His humanity could be seen, therefore it can be represented.

In response we should point out that the Lord did indeed provide a figure, a “theophany” of Himself, even during the Mosaic era. There are several places one might reference to show this:

- Exodus 3.4-6: Note here that the Lord presents Himself to Moses in a burning bush, and Moses hid his face, for He was afraid to look upon God.
- Exodus 4.24: In this interesting passage we see that the Lord met him [Moses] in the inn. Although there was not a description given of this meeting, or what form the Lord took, there was a meeting such that Zipporah understood the threat from the Lord Himself under which her husband lay, and she put forth her hand and circumcised their sons.
- Exodus 13.21-22; 14.19-24; 40.34-38; Numbers 14.11-19: Note here the manifestation of the Lord to them in the fire by night, and cloud by day, and in Numbers 14 this is even spoken of as seeing the Lord “face to face”.
- Exodus 24.9-11: In this passage we have a clear representation of the Lord to the seventy elders of Israel as they partook of a covenant-meal before Him. He accepted them, and graciously manifested His presence to them for their comfort, after the fearful proclamation of Sinai.

So it seems that there was a visible manifestation of the Lord to the children of Israel. Deuteronomy 4.12 above is speaking of the absence of such a manifestation at Sinai, but it is clear that there were many times the Lord provided a physical presence of some kind for their comfort, guidance, etc.

What would have been proper for them to do in such cases? The seventy elders of Israel, as they ate and drank in the presence of God would have made a right use of that situation by worshipping, by humbling themselves in the sight of God, before whom they ate. In other words, the thoughts, the actions, the words, all would rightly be brought into conformity to a worshipful and reverent carriage and behavior before this manifestation of Himself that the Lord provided.

What of the children of Israel before the column of fire and smoke? Were they not required at very least to obey the Lord in His movements? As the fire or smoke stayed, they stayed, and as it moved, they moved, for this was the representation of God in their midst. Or when the fire came down upon the Tabernacle, or the glory of God filled the house, the people worshipped, and rightly so. (Leviticus 9.1-4, 23-24)

In all of these instances reported by Moses we have the provision of an image by God Himself, and it is presented to the people so that they might perform some action of worship—obedient following, bowing down, a confession, etc. But note that even in these days of the Lord’s provision of a “visual” He forbade the people from making their own representations, no matter how accurate to what they had observed. The prohibition of making images in the Pentateuch did not therefore have anything to do with an absence of material to work with. Instead, it runs to the heart of the second commandment—the Lord is to be worshipped only in ways of His own appointment. This is why images of things ought not to be used, no matter how “devotional” they seem, and no matter how accurate to any historical circumstance they might be—because these artifacts evoke worship. Think of one of the seventy elders returning to his tent and drawing what he had seen on mount Sinai to share with his family. What would be the purpose of that? Every time he looked upon it he would be induced to think of the gracious, merciful God who had him to His own table, to eat and drink, and that apart from laying His hand upon him, the sinner. Such pious thoughts, being evoked of the Lord, would have been wrought by gazing upon the image of something he had truly seen, and would have then represented to his family for their “devotion” as well. But this is exactly what is forbidden in the commandment not to produce images nor to worship by means of images, for such an approach is abhorrent to God, rising out of our minds and creative ability, rather than hearkening to the Lord and His commands as the approved method of drawing near to Him.

So it is no assault to our argument to declare that Christ had a true body that in its day could have been drawn. The Lord had provided his own visual manifestations of Himself to his people during the days of Moses, and throughout the rest of redemptive history as well, but He never gave His people leave to depict those visual revelations of Himself, either by a graven image kind of statuary, or by a likeness on a canvas or other flat media. The passages below show that the Lord did provide visible manifestations of Himself in Old Testament history other than the

Pentateuch:

In the days of the Patriarchs: Genesis 12.7; 17.1; 18.1-2; 26.2, 24; 32.24-32; 35.1, 7-9

In the days after the Pentateuch: Joshua 5.13-15; Judges 6.12-24; 13.3-21; 2 Samuel 24.16-17; 1 Kings 3.5; 9.2; 11.9; 2 Chronicles 3.1;

Also in the days of the Prophets, where visions were seen by them: Isaiah 6.1-5; Ezekiel 1.26; Daniel 10.6; 12.6-7;

Yet, with all of this information, and even with the further revelation of Colossians 1.15 which declares that Christ is the image of the *invisible* God, the Lord continues His unrevoked prohibition of image-making. Certainly, the reason for this is in keeping with the regulation of His worship, according to His command, and not according to a paucity of material from which to draw. It would be correct to conclude with Calvin, in his comments on Deuteronomy 4.12 and 15, that the Lord forbade imagery to His people not for want of information, but to elevate their worship and thoughts above that which is sensory:

Wherefore, this argument does not appear to be valid and good, that it is sinful to represent God in a visible image, because His voice was once heard without His being seen; when, on the other side, it is easy to object that visible forms have often been exhibited, wherein He testified His presence. The solution is twofold: first, that, although God may have invested Himself in certain forms for the purpose of manifesting Himself, this must be accounted as a peculiar circumstance, and not be taken as a general rule; secondly, that the visions shewn to the patriarchs were testimonies of His invisible glory, rather to elevate men's minds to things above than to keep them entangled amongst earthly elements. In the promulgation of His Law, God first prescribed what believers must follow; because He saw that this was the best method (*compendium*) for retaining the minds of His people in true religion, and at the same time the best remedy for idolatry. Unless we submit to this counsel of God, we shall not only betray a licentious spirit of contention, but shall run directly against God, like butting bulls. For it was not in vain that Moses laid down this principle, that when God collected to Himself a Church, and handed down a certain and inviolable rule for holy living, He had not invested Himself in a bodily shape, but had exhibited the living image of His glory in the doctrine itself. Hence we may conclude that all those who seek for God in a visible figure, not only decline, but actually revolt, from the true study of piety.¹¹

The third argument advanced by our brethren in support of images of Christ is that they have a didactic use, and that especially to the children of believers, who may be tempted to ask why the Lord Jesus Christ does not appear in any of their Bible picture books, and further, tempted to think that He did not have a body.

In answering this question, we would simply point out that the teaching of the Church ought to cleave closely to the means and methods described in Holy Scripture, and the great Head of the Church speaking therein, as we attempt to instruct the flock of Christ. In that instruction, our Lord Jesus has declared that He is pleased to use particular means:

1. The Preaching of the Word: According to the Bible, the preaching of the Word of God is indeed a setting forth of Christ Himself—a display of Him, and the Lord's means of saving sinners.
 - a. Romans 10.13-17; 1 Corinthians 1.17-31; These passages, among others teach the Scripture truth that instruction unto faith comes by the preaching of the Word, by hearing the Word of God, etc. The Head of the Church has chosen the way to reveal Himself to be received and believed upon, and it is by preaching and instruction from the Word of God, and not by human-invented images and pictures.
 - b. Additionally, note that the Apostle Paul calls the preaching he conducted while ministering among the Churches of Galatia an evident setting forth of Christ crucified before their eyes. (Galatians 3.1) Let us beware of thinking that the divinely ordained method of instruction is

¹¹ John Calvin and Charles William Bingham, *Commentaries on the Four Last Books of Moses Arranged in the Form of a Harmony*, vol. 2 (Bellingham, WA: Logos Bible Software, 2010), 120.

somehow wanting, such that it needs visual supplementation, and that part of that supplement is a purported picture of the Second Person of the Trinity. Christ has ordained how he is to be revealed to the Church, and to all—in the preaching of the Word, in the proclamation of the Gospel.

2. The administration of the sacrament of the Lord's Supper is a constant reminder of the incarnation, and a method of representing Christ to the worshipper that Christ Himself has ordained. This is the "image of Christ" the "visible representation of Him" that remains for the people of God to use. In so doing, there is not some contra-Scriptural separation of the natures of Christ as if "we're just holding in our hands His human nature". Instead, by faith, during the administration of the Lord's Supper, we take hold of the *whole* Christ by faith in His full and efficacious salvation—in the necessity of His divinity and humanity, and the unity of His Person.¹² Attempting to depict his human nature separately from His divinity is a grave mistake, as Calvin advised:

And can a man devise to tear the Majesty of our Lord Jesus Christ, and to deface his glory more, than by the things that the Papists do? Behold, they paint and portray Jesus Christ, who (as we know) is not only man, but also God manifested in the flesh: and what a representation is that? He is God's eternal son, in whom dwelleth the fullness of the Godhead, yea even substantially. Seeing it is said, substantially, should we have portraitures and images whereby only the flesh may be represented? Is it not a wiping away of that which is chiefest in our Lord Jesus Christ, that is to wit, of his divine Majesty? Yes: and therefore whensoever a Crucifix stands mopping & mowing in the Church, it is all one as if the Devil had defaced the son of God. Ye see then that the Papists are destitute of all excuse.¹⁵

Note in this statement the folly of separating Christ's natures from His theanthropic Person. The Lord of the Church has commanded how He would have himself made known to His people—by Word and Sacrament. The didactic use of purported images of Christ is something invented, innovated upon the Church's authorized ministry.

It has also been intimated that children may grow up to doubt the incarnation if they do not see pictorial representations of Christ. In other words, they might imbibe in the Docetic error of the first century Gnostics, who denied the human nature of Christ. This argument fails when one considers that even the Docetic heresiarchs claimed that something could be seen, and therefore it could be depicted—they simply denied that it was a true human nature—claiming that it was only an appearance. But let us remember that even an "appearance" can appear on a canvas. A pictorial representation does not work against Docetism. What does militate against such errors is the proper use of Christ's appointed means of instruction—the preaching of the whole counsel of God, and the right administration of the Sacrament of the Lord's Supper, where the incarnation of the God-man is taught faithfully.

Hear Richard Sibbes on this matter:

Oh but to behold Christ in the glass of the word, with a spirit of faith, that is the best picture and representation that can be! It is scarce worth spending so much time, as to confute that foolery, to have any grace wrought in the heart by such abominable means as that is, as they use it. Take it at the best, it is but a bastardly help, and bastardly means breed a bastardly devotion. For will God work grace in the heart by means of man's devising? If pictures be any teachers, they are 'teachers of lies,' saith the prophet, Isa. 9:15; and in the church of God, till pastors and teachers became idols, idols never became teachers. Then came the doctrine of idols teaching of simple people, when idols became teachers a thousand years after Christ. So that the best picture to see Christ in, is the word and sacraments; and the best eye to see him

¹² See Larger Catechism Questions and Answers 37-40

¹⁵ Jean Calvin, *The Sermons of M. Iohn Caluin Vpon the Fifth Booke of Moses Called Deuteronomie Faithfully Gathered Word for Word as He Preached Them in Open Pulpit; Together with a Preface of the Ministers of the Church of Geneua, and an Admonishment Made by the Deacons There. Also There Are Annexed Two Profitable Tables, the One Containing the Chiefe Matters; the Other the Places of Scripture Herein Alledged. Translated out of French by Arthur Golding*, Early English Books Online (At London: Henry Middleton for George Bishop, 1583), 138.

with, is the eye of faith in the word and sacraments. Keep that clear, and we need no crucifixes, no such bastardly helps of bastardly devotion, devised by proud men that would not be beholden to God for his ordinances.¹⁴

Speaking of the Lord's Supper, Rev. Stephen Charnock declares:

This is all the picture Christ hath left of himself; he never appointed any images or crucifixes, never imprinted the features of his face upon Veronica's napkin.¹⁵

There is one more argument we would advance against this assertion. Our Lord Himself declared a particular blessing upon those who have "not seen, yet believed."¹⁶ Rather than asserting seeing with the eyes, our Lord Himself, by implication, gives validation and efficacy to the ordinary means of grace in revealing Himself to all.

The next argument advanced by our brethren is that they stand against these artistic or didactic pictorial representations of Christ being used in worship. They are, they say, only for teaching, or some other artistic expression.

The error of this argument has already been expressed in the historical quotations at the beginning of our paper, which we will shortly see. When we behold a sunrise on a clear morning, we may rightly be moved to say, "The heavens declare the glory of God; and the firmament showeth his handywork".¹⁷ Note that we have been drawn into a frame of devotion, according to the Scriptures, by what the Lord has made. We have not worshipped that sun, nor the skies, nor the earth, but we have, by rightly using the Word of God, been drawn into a mindset of devotion and private worship to God Himself. We have done so by making use of Scriptural instruction and guidance, so that we might understand how to use the general revelation that God has given us, as an aid to glorifying Him, according to His instruction in His Word. Further, we can also look upon the sunrise on a clear day and not make such a declaration at all. We can pass by such a sight in busy-ness, in concern for other things, or we may have a different Scripture upon our minds for meditation that does not call for us to stop and consider the sunrise in the light of Psalm 19.1.

However, when we come across a pictorial representation of Christ, we come to a subject (Christ Himself) that must always be to us the object of worship, adoration, praise, love, devotion, etc. In other words, it is not possible for the Christian to think of Christ apart from Him being the wellspring of worshipful, and devotional thoughts, words, and deeds. Whenever we are induced to think of our Lord Jesus, we ought to be ravished with His love for us, humbled before Him, and drawn to worship Him. How then can a purported picture of Christ avoid being the object, or the means of worship? I realize, along with everyone else, that no one believes a supposed picture of Christ is Christ, just as a golden calf is not Yahveh.¹⁸ But the people were condemned because they sought to worship Yahveh by means of a calf—a worship form they had co-opted from the bull-god Apis, which they learned in Egypt. When a well-meaning but ignorant brother or sister in Christ beholds a "didactic image" of their Lord, how are they not drawn to worship Him? How can that image fail to produce thoughts of worship and devotion to Christ? How can it fail to produce worshipful thoughts in the educated? And when it does, it becomes an unauthorized, yea, a forbidden way to worship the Lord our God—it becomes an idol. As we said above, no one says, "what a lovely picture of the human nature of Christ". Hear the words of our fathers in the faith on this circumstance:

Thomas Vincent, commenting on Shorter Catechism 51 declares:

Question 6: Is it not lawful to have pictures of Jesus Christ, he being a man as well as God?

¹⁴ Richard Sibbes, *The Complete Works of Richard Sibbes*, ed. Alexander Balloch Grosart, vol. 4 (Edinburgh; London; Dublin: James Nichol; James Nisbet and Co.; W. Robertson, 1863), 252.

¹⁵ Stephen Charnock, *The Complete Works of Stephen Charnock*, vol. 4 (Edinburgh; London; Dublin: James Nichol; James Nisbet and Co.; W. Robertson; G. Herbert, 1864–1866), 406.

¹⁶ John 20.29

¹⁷ Psalm 19.1

¹⁸ Exodus 32.1-6

Answer: It is not lawful to have pictures of Jesus Christ, because his divine nature cannot be pictured at all; and because his body, as it is now glorified, cannot be pictured as it is; and because, if it do not stir up devotion, it is in vain; if it stir up devotion, it is a worshipping by an image or picture, and so a palpable breach of the second commandment.¹⁹

Professor John Murray: 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 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 will worship. 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.²⁰

In this we see the impossibility of a pictorial representation of Christ being “merely didactic” or artistic. It is designed to convey information concerning Christ, and information concerning Christ if true, ought to draw us to worship Him; but in drawing us to worship Him, this image then becomes a means of worship, and strikes against the root of the second commandment. If it is false, it is vain and ought to be refused.

Further, what strange divinity and pedagogy is this, that separates teaching from worship, in any kind of godly or Biblical practice? How can we uprightly declare that it is possible, and even desirable to teach someone about Christ, by means of an image or pictorial representation, and yet deny that the doctrine they have learned of Him from that picture ought to be used in the context of worship? I suppose our brethren would respond by declaring that they have no desire for these images to appear in the sanctuaries of churches, and so in that sense they will not be used in the context of worship. With this proposal, we heartily agree. But what of a home, a room where family or private worship is conducted? What of a bedroom where bedtime prayers are said? What of an automobile where prayer is often wont to be made? It becomes clear that if the image teaches some doctrine of Christ, it must stir up some kind of devotion.

There is a further consideration that we ought to add in closing, which has great pastoral implications as we endeavor to be of service to our Lord in the care of His flock, and we will have the Rev. John Owen to speak to it:

Now, wherein is Christ fairer than the children of men?

I answer, In three things:—(1.) In the dignity of his person; (2.) In the excellency of his work; and, (3.) In the power and heavenliness of his doctrine. Many other instances may be given, but things may be gathered to these three heads; whereby we may make answer unto the question, that is tacitly asked of us by nominal professors in the world, which was asked of the spouse by the daughters of Jerusalem, Cant. 5:9, “What is thy beloved more than another beloved?”—“What is there in Christ more than in other persons and things, that there is such a stir made about him?” I say, “He is fairer than the children of men.”

(1.) In *the dignity of his person*. He is a more excellent person. Wherein consists the excellency of Christ’s person? Truly, not at all in the outward appearance of his human nature, especially while here in the world. It is the foundation of all devotion among some, the making of glorious pictures of Christ; by which means to represent him fine and glorious. But what doth he speak of himself in Ps. 22:6? “I am a worm, and no man.” He was brought to that low condition that he was of no esteem, of no reputation. But if we could have had a sight of him, how comely would he have been! Why, “he had neither form nor comeliness,” in his outward appearance, “that when we should see him we should desire him,” Isa. 53:2;—wherein, then, consists the

¹⁹ Thomas Vincent, *A Family Instructional Guide*, electronic edition based on the first Banner of Truth ed., 1980. (Simpsonville, SC: Christian Classics Foundation, 1996), 126.

²⁰ John Murray, printed in the *Reformed Herald*, vol. 16, no. 9 (February 1961), and from *The Presbyterian Reformed Magazine*, vol. 7, no. 4 (Winter 1993)

dignity of his person? In two things:—[1.] In the glory of his divine nature. [2.] In the immeasurable fulness of his human nature with grace:²¹

It will rightly be said of Christ that in His sovereignty He chose his face, stature, “body type” etc. all as a part of His mission upon earth. The descriptions of Him we have in Scripture do not at all speak to these physical attributes, except to augment the estate of His humiliation. Rev. Owen has hit upon an important point—that the pictorial representations of Christ are most generally glorious as it concerns His physical appearance, when the indications of Scripture run in the opposite direction, and emphasize, if I may be so bold as to say, His beauty of holiness in obedience to his Father in the fulfillment of His mission. That the majority of pictorial representations of Christ show Him to be “goodly”, handsome, well favored, etc. works against the Scripture emphasis upon His glorious Person, and humble taking the form of a servant. This reminds us of a widely used argument against pictorial representations of any of the Persons of the Godhead used during the days of the Reformation: Images are teachers of lies, Hab. 2:18.²²

For when Jeremiah declares that “the stock is a doctrine of vanities” (Jer. 10:8), and Habakkuk, “that the molten image” is “a teacher of lies,” the general doctrine to be inferred certainly is, that everything respecting God which is learned from images is futile and false.²³

The final argument taken up in this paper is a brief examination of the language of the second commandment itself, specifically of those portions dealing with the prohibition to make, to bow down, and to serve.

As we come to the commandment itself, we see here, as is true of other commandments, a prohibition. A brief analysis of the commandment reveals prohibitions with clarifying comments, and a reason annexed to the commandment itself. It would be fair to say that the “second commandment” truly has three separate prohibitions. The context reveals that these three prohibitions are to be taken together, forming a unitary teaching which is rightly summarized by the Shorter Catechism:

Q. 50. What is required in the second commandment?

A. The second commandment requireth the receiving, observing, and keeping pure and entire, all such religious worship and ordinances as God hath appointed in his word.

Q. 51. What is forbidden in the second commandment?

A. The second commandment forbiddeth the worshipping of God by images, or any other way not appointed in his word.

As we examine the text, the first “thou shalt not” pertains to the making of images. It is clear that all forms of artistic expression are not what is in view in this prohibition. The Reformed Church has never understood this first prohibition to forbid the making of statues, or the drawing or painting of pictures generally, but only forbidding the making of those that pertain to the worship of God, used as articles of devotion, as is made clear by the other two prohibitions, which refer respectively to bowing down, and serving. There are several implications in this prohibition:

1. The primary prohibition is not to make images, and the other prohibitions support and inform this primary matter.
2. If one cannot make such an image, it is clearly implied that one cannot possess one, either. The man who declares, “I didn’t make it, I only bought it, found it, or acquired it” some other way is not excused.

²¹ John Owen, *The Works of John Owen*, ed. William H. Goold, vol. 8 (Edinburgh: T&T Clark, n.d.), 479–480.

²² Thomas Watson, *The Select Works of the Rev. Thomas Watson, Comprising His Celebrated Body of Divinity, in a Series of Lectures on the Shorter Catechism, and Various Sermons and Treatises* (New York: Robert Carter & Brothers, 1855), 229.

²³ John Calvin, *Institutes of the Christian Religion*, ed. Mortimer J. Adler and Philip W. Goetz, trans. Henry Beveridge, Second Edition, vol. 20, *Great Books of the Western World* (Chicago; Auckland; Geneva; London; Madrid; Manila; Paris; Rome; Seoul; Sydney; Tokyo; Toronto: Encyclopædia Britannica, Inc.; Robert P. Gwinn, 1990), 34.

3. If it is a sin to make it, we must take care that whatever artistic expressions we create are not abused to some unholy, idolatrous end. In keeping with the ethic of the Apostle Paul, we must take care not to lead our brethren into sin by setting before them a temptation they will not be able to bear. (1 Corinthians 8.7-13)
4. That this prohibition deals with the way we worship the Lord is made clear by the secondary prohibitions, pertaining to bowing down, and serving. I say, secondary prohibitions, because these are added to clarify the context in which the making of these images is forbidden.
 - a. The first of these prohibitions, bowing down, speaks to the reverential and humble posture of a worshipper. This verb is used 172 times in the Hebrew Old Testament. It is variously translated in the Authorized Version to worship, to bow down, to fall flat (upon the face), to crouch, humbly to beseech, to fall down to the earth, to do reverence, and also to do obeisance. This posture is not only physical, but, as with all expressions of worship to the Lord our God, ought to be accompanied with the attitude of mind corresponding to this outward show of reverence. The worshipper is required not only to show reverence and humility unto the Lord, but to present a reverent mind unto the Lord as well. (Romans 12.1-2) So the command thus far is not to make, so as to make an object that stirs up reverence upon seeing it.
 - b. The second clarifying prohibition rounds out what it means to worship the Lord. The word is the ordinary word for service, similar to a service performed by a servant toward a master. However, when the master is the Lord our God, and the context is elements or ordinances of worship, the service is understood as the services of worship we offer to the Lord by way of His command. The LXX translation of this verse uses the Greek word from which we get our word liturgy—those services we perform to the Lord, in the context of our devotion to Him, according to His command.
5. When we draw these three prohibitions together, we have a more complete understanding of what the second commandment requires.
 - a. Seeing that our worship of God has a twofold structure (reverential attitude of mind, coupled with a commanded liturgy) images made depicting our Lord Jesus Christ invariably, if they generate any thinking of Him at all, generate the reverence and humility commanded for the Lord’s worship, and in many cases, have also evoked a reverent physical posture. This is what is forbidden in the commandment. Therefore, we are not to make them.
 - b. When it is objected that such images are not “made for worship” we must reply that the command is concerned with the prohibition even of *making* such an image which may be abused as a means of worship.
 - c. And finally, obedience to this command is advanced as we embrace the Biblical concept of worship not only as sincere reverence, but also that the Lord has called upon us to serve Him according to His commands. That is, in the liturgy used, whether public, private, or secret worship is considered, His Word forms the basis of those services that we use in our worship services to Him. This is the point, and the end of sincere reverence. Put simply, a sincere heart desires a Biblical liturgy. And it is clear from the second commandment that imagery can form no part of that liturgy.

This concludes our brief study. I pray that our brethren with whom we differ will consider the arguments brought in this paper in the spirit and mind with which it was undertaken—charity for the brethren, a love of the truth, and most importantly, all to the glory of our triune God, and to offer up unto Him a “pure offering”.

*For from the rising of the sun even unto the going down of the same my name shall be great among the Gentiles; and in every place incense shall be offered unto my name, and a pure offering: for my name shall be great among the heathen, saith the LORD of hosts.*²⁴

²⁴ *The Holy Bible: King James Version.*, Malachi 1:11.