

# Are Pictures of Christ Unbiblical?

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In our day it is very common to see pictures of Christ in churches and in homes. Images of the Savior are commonly found on stained glass windows, church entry rooms, Christian school classrooms, living rooms, book covers, Charismatic television programs, church billboards, family Bibles and on the wall behind the pulpit. The vast majority of “Christian” bookstores sell a wide variety of pictures of Jesus. There is everything from the effeminate northern European Messiah to the grotesquely muscular Hulk-like renditions of the Lord. Even in Reformed churches (which ought to know better) pictures of the suffering servant are fairly common in Sunday school materials. Do representations of God’s Son violate Scripture or are such pictures merely works of art that are perfectly acceptable as long as they are not worshiped or used as aids to worship? Keep in mind that low church Protestants who use pictures of Christ insist that the pictures are not used in religious worship at all. They at the most (we are told) are merely artistic renditions used for educational purposes.

While many people who use pictures of Jesus are very sincere and do not bow down to such images, nevertheless the use of such images is unlawful and sinful. There are many reasons why the use of pictures of Christ is unscriptural.

First, the use of pictures of our Lord is a violation of the second commandment. This commandment says, “You shall not make for yourself a carved image – 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 upon 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” (Ex. 20: 4-5).

This commandment forbids worshiping rank idols or images of God or any image of anything created. It also forbids the use of images as aids to worship or devotion. Papists for example, would say that they do not worship a crucifix or statue of Christ but that such images are aids or mediums through which to worship the Son of God. “Romanists make images of God the Father, painting him in their church windows as an old man; and an image of Christ on the crucifix; and, because it is against the letter of this commandment, they sacrilegiously blot it out of their catechism, and divide the tenth commandment into two.”<sup>1</sup>

Modern Protestants who use pictures of Jesus point out that *unlike* Romanists, Eastern Orthodox and high church Anglicans they do not bow down to nor worship pictures of the Lord. They argue that their pictures are purely educational, or artistic, or historical reminders. Further, it is noted that pictures of people, historical scenes, famous figures and animals are universally accepted as permissible among Protestants as long as these things are not bowed down to, served or worshiped. Thus, having a picture of Jesus is no different than having a picture of Abraham Lincoln or a close friend. While this

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<sup>1</sup> Thomas Watson, *The Ten Commandments* (Carlisle, Pa: Banner of Truth, 1965 [1692, 1890]), 61.

typical argument makes sense to many people it needs to be emphatically rejected for the following reasons.

(1) Jesus is not like Abraham Lincoln or anyone else because He is both God and man in *one person*. Therefore, any image of our Lord would be automatically religious or devotional in nature. As such it would immediately fall under the biblical perimeter of the regulative principle of worship. In other words, a picture of the Savior cannot be regarded as an item belonging to the sphere of things indifferent (*adiaphora*). If believers are to use pictures of the Lord, they must first find divine warrant from God's word for their use.

Is there divine warrant for pictorial representations of the Messiah? No, there is not. There are no commands to make pictures of our Lord. In fact such pictures clearly violate the second commandment for a true picture of Jesus *should* evoke worship in the believer. If a pictorial representation brings thoughts of love, devotion, and praise toward the Son of God, then obviously it is an aid or medium to worship even if people are not bowing down toward the picture.

(2) The word of God does not give believers enough information to make a faithful representation of Christ's physical appearance. Isaiah tells us that regarding the Savior's outward appearance that there is nothing of beauty to delight the eye (see 53:2). In the book of Revelation there is an apocalyptic description of the exalted Lord (e.g., Rev. 1: 13-17) and the Savior as a slain Lamb (Rev. 4:6). However, no competent scholar would regard these apocalyptic statements as literal descriptions of Christ. They are vivid prophetic visions that are intended to teach the church a rich theology regarding our Lord and His work. The apostles who spent over three years with Jesus, who knew exactly what His human face looked like, who had strong memories of His person and work, could have worked with artists to leave the church an accurate portrait of the Messiah. Yet they refused to leave the church such a portrait. Therefore, it is obvious that God does not sanction portraits of His Son.

Second, since no accurate picture of Christ can be produced by man, all pictures of the Savior are false representations of the Son of God. But (as some may object), if it is permissible to make artistic representations of famous battles and even the apostles why is it wrong to do the same with the Messiah? Once again, we must be reminded that Jesus is totally unique. Although He had a real human body and soul (1 Jn. 1:14), "yet his human nature subsists in his divine person, which no picture can represent (Psa. 45:2)."<sup>2</sup> God's Son is different in that He alone is the supreme object of our faith. This means that everything we are to believe concerning Him must come from divine revelation alone. "That which is not of faith is sin" (Rom 14:23). Any picture of the Lord that is based on man's imagination is will worship, for it sets up a human invention in the place of or along side of the biblical data concerning the Christ. When faith is directed to human fantasies in the place of or along side of faith in divine revelation, biblical religion is debased with humanism.

How could Jesus who is "the way, the truth and the life" (Jn. 14:6) or the Holy Spirit who is "the Spirit of truth" (Jn. 16:13) be honored or pleased with human fantasies regarding the Son? The fact that our Lord is both God and man in one person renders all human representations of the Son totally inappropriate and even abominable. Making a fake or false version of the Messiah is even more wicked than making a pretend version

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<sup>2</sup> Fisher's Catechism, from Q & A #51, answer to subquestion #9.

of the Bible. Further, what would one of the apostles think of the many perverse images of the Savior that are common today (e.g., the blond, blue eyed effeminate Jesus, the black power Jesus, the Hollywood hippie Jesus, the evangelical movie Jesus, the bookstore muscleman Jesus)? Peter and John would be totally shocked by such irreverent, disrespectful, unbiblical, humanistic, blasphemous garbage. Further, because artists cannot form a faithful representation of the Savior's physical appearance, their renditions of the Lord inevitably are influenced by their theology and worldview. Many of the popular paintings, etchings and drawings that are seen in books and family Bibles today are products of nineteenth century Liberalism, "Christian" feminism, Arminianism and pietistic forms of antinomianism. These false theological systems present a one-sided, distorted picture of our Lord. He usually is presented as the gentle Jesus, the meek and humble teacher who emphasized the love and Fatherhood of God; who was a friendly teacher of ethics; who never became angry with sinners or preached about sin, judgment and the wrath to come. J. G. Vos writes, "Perhaps more people living today have derived their ideas of Jesus Christ from these typically 'liberal' pictures of Jesus than have derived their ideas of Jesus from the Bible itself. Such people inevitably think of Jesus as a human person, rather than thinking of him according to the biblical teaching as a divine person with a human nature. The inevitable effect of the popular acceptance of pictures of Jesus is to overemphasize his humanity and to forget or neglect his deity (which of course no picture can portray)." <sup>3</sup>

Also, pictures of our Lord perpetuate the false, premillennial doctrine that the Messiah is not presently reigning as king at the right hand of God. Many evangelicals believe that the Lord does not really rule over the earth until the Second Coming. Theologically, they view Jesus much the same way as He was in His state of humiliation. The apostle Paul rejects such thinking. He says, "Even though we have known Christ according to the flesh, yet now we know Him thus no longer" (2 Cor. 5:16). We live in the post resurrection era. The Messiah is no longer the meek, mild, suffering servant. Now He is the white horse rider, the victorious king, who is glorified, who has all power in heaven and on earth (Mt. 28:19). The whole Bible and nothing but the Bible is to inform our understanding of Christ. Every aspect of His person and work is the object of our faith. Anything that places a fantasy, a human invention or a false image of our Lord before our eyes or into our minds does not strengthen biblical faith but corrupts and degrades it. If you want to see the Savior then study, meditate on, and memorize Scripture, for therein the Messiah is revealed in all His glory. Dunham writes, "It is not lawful to have pictures of Jesus Christ...because, if it does not stir up devotion, it is in vain, if it does stir up devotion, it is a worshipping by an image or picture, and so a palpable breach of the second commandment." <sup>4</sup>

Third, all pictures of the Savior implicitly promote the ancient heresy of Nestorius who separated the two natures of Christ--the human from the divine. <sup>5</sup> When the

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<sup>3</sup> Johannes G. Vos, *The Westminster Larger Catechism: A Commentary* (Phillipsburg, NJ: Presbyterian and Reformed, 2002), 292.

<sup>4</sup> James Durham, *The Law Unsealed: or, A Practical Exposition of the Ten Commandments*.

<sup>5</sup> "And if it be said man's soul cannot be painted, but his body may, and yet that picture representeth a man; I answer, it doth so, because he has but one nature, and what representeth that representeth the person; but it is not so with Christ: his Godhead is not a distinct part of the human nature, as the soul of man is (which is necessarily supposed in every living man), but a distinct nature, only united with the manhood in that one person, Christ, who has no fellow; therefore what representeth him must not represent a man only, but must

apostles looked upon Jesus they were beholding the God-man. Thus the apostle John could write: “And the Word became 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” (Jn. 1:14). Aside from the fact that pictures of God’s Son are false artistic impressions, they also cannot portray the divine nature of the Messiah. Thus, they not only portray Him as *infinitely* less than He was, is and ever shall be; but also detract from His divine glory. They implicitly teach a false theology of Christ. This observation is one of the primary reasons that the early church condemned pictures of Jesus. A major church council in Constantinople (A. D. 754) decreed:

If any person shall divide 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 of 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.

Regarding this council Philip Schaff writes, “The counsel, appealing to the second commandment and other scripture passages denouncing idolatry (Rom. 1:23, 25; John 4:24), and opinions of the Fathers (Epiphanius, Eusebius, Gregory Nazianzen, Chrysostom, etc.), condemned and forbade the public and private worship of sacred images on pain of deposition and excommunication.... It denounced all religious representations by painter or sculptor as presumptuous, pagan and idolatrous. Those who make pictures of the Savior, who is God as well as man in one inseparable person, either limit the incomprehensible Godhead to the bounds of created flesh, or confound his two natures like Eutyches, or separate them, like Nestorius, or deny his Godhead, like Arius; and those who worship such a picture are guilty of the same heresy and blasphemy.”<sup>6</sup>

Pictures of Christ are lies of the imagination that pervert and degrade the Scriptural doctrine of our Lord. We are to remember our precious Saviour *not* by crass artistic fantasies but by celebrating the Lord’s supper, attending the means of grace and meditating on Scripture. Paul says that “faith comes by hearing and hearing by the word of God” (Rom. 10:17). Jesus tells us that sanctification comes by means of God’s word. “Sanctify them by Your truth. Your word is truth” (Jn. 17:17). Artistic impressions of God’s Son may stir the emotions. They may bring a tear to the eye or joy to the heart. But, since they are the figments of man’s mind, they cannot sanctify or increase our faith.

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represent Christ, Immanuel, God-man, otherwise it is not his image. Beside, there is no warrant for representing him in his manhood; nor any colorable possibility of it, but as men fancy; and shall that be called Christ’s portraiture? Would that be called any other man’s portraiture which were drawn at men’s pleasure, without regard to the pattern? Again, there is no use of it; for either that image behooved to have but common estimation with other images, and that would wrong Christ, or a peculiar respect of reverence, and so it sinneth against the commandment that forbiddeth all religious reverence to images, but he being God and so the object of worship, we must either divide his natures, or say, that image or picture representeth not Christ. From the *Law Unsealed: or, A Practical Exposition of the Ten Commandments*.

<sup>6</sup> Phillip Schaff, *History of the Christian Church* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1987 [1910]), 4:457-458

Indeed, as non-commanded violations of the express teaching of the Bible they are destructive of faith and sanctification. “Little children, keep yourselves from idols” (1 Jn. 5:21).

Pictures of our Lord cannot sanctify because: (a) They flow from the imagination of the artist and thus are fiction; and, (b) They pervert the biblical teaching regarding the theanthropic Saviour by robbing Him of His glory, by separating the two natures- the divine from the human. This fact has important implications for those who want to retain pictures for educational purposes (e.g., children’s Sunday school materials). We ask those in favor of pictures of God’s Son for educational purposes the following questions. How can you teach the truth by setting a lie (i.e., a human fantasy, a fictional rendering) before the eyes of children? How many children grow up thinking of the Messiah as a blue eyed, effeminate, long-haired, hippie wimp because of the ignorance and incompetence of Sunday school teachers? How do you expect children to be sanctified by something that has no basis in Scripture and therefore is an invention of man’s mind? (Keep in mind the Bible gives no physical description of our Lord other than some passages which can not possibly be actually rendered by an artist, e.g., Mt. 17:2; Rev. 1:13 ff.) Paul says that human philosophies and autonomous rules and regulations are of no value against the indulgence of the flesh (Col. 2:8, 21-23). Pictures of Jesus for educational or devotional use are man-made inventions that have no basis in Scripture and thus are human traditions that fall under the condemnation of God.

Fourth, both the Bible and church history teach that religious images invented by men for educational or devotional use are snares of the devil that corrupt the people of God with idolatry and declension. Because of our sinful natures the hearts of men are easily and sadly frequently drawn toward sensual, corrupt forms of worship. In 2 Kings 18:4 we read that godly king Hezekiah broke in pieces the bronze serpent that Moses had made because the people of Israel were burning incense to it. The bronze serpent (unlike pictures of Christ) was a lawful image because it was commanded by God. Yet as soon as it became a religious devotional object Jehovah wanted it destroyed as an item of superstition and idolatry.

In the ancient church, pictures were made to honor the saints, the virgin Mary and Jesus. This practice led to all sorts of superstitious, corrupt idolatrous practices: prayer to dead saints; the adoration and worship of Mary; kissing the feet of statues of the saints; keeping and worshipping of relics; saints days; pilgrimages; the dressing up of statues in different clothes for different holy days; parades with statues and pictures in honor of saints, the virgin mother and Christ; cathedrals built to honor the relics of dead saints and so on. There is no question that many of the poor deluded souls who led the church down the dark demonic path of Romanism were sincere. They probably were very pious and had the best of motives. But their love of human devices, their additions to the worship that God had authorized led to the full blown damnable religion of popery. “But say the Papists, images are laymen’s books, and they are good to put them in the mind of God. One of the Popish Councils affirmed, that we might learn more by an image than by a long study of the Scriptures.... For Papists to say they make use of an image to put them in mind of God, is as if a woman should say she keeps company with another man to put her in mind of her husband.”<sup>7</sup>

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<sup>7</sup> Thomas Watson, *The Ten Commandments*, 61.

For modern Protestants to ignore the clear teaching of Scripture and history as if they were immune to the dangers of superstition and idolatry is arrogant, foolish and deadly. The papal church did not develop into the demonic monstrosity it now is overnight. But, as Paul warned, “a little leaven leavens the whole lump” (1 Cor. 5:6). The rather common practice today (even in conservative Presbyterian churches) of using pictures of Jesus in educational materials (e.g., books, videos, Sunday school materials) violates the second commandment, teaches a false doctrine of the Messiah, corrupts the worship of God, is blatantly disrespectful to the second person of the trinity and thus should be hated and shunned by all Bible believing Christians. The forefathers of the Calvinistic wing of the Reformation scrupulously refrained, as a matter of principle, from the use of pictures of Christ. Note the words of John Knox from the “Book of Discipline, Third Head” (1560): “For let your Honours be assuredly persuaded, that there shall God’s wrath reign, not only upon the blind and obstinate idolater, but also up on the negligent suffers of the same; especially if God have armed their hands with power to suppress such abominations. By idolatry we understand, the Mass, invocation of saints, adoration of images, and the keeping and retaining of the same; and, finally, all honouring of God not contained in his holy Word.”

Let us do likewise and return to the strict conscientious adherence to the second commandment by our spiritual forefathers. The fact that the use of pictures of Christ is widespread among professing Christians in our day does not make it right. It sadly is another sign of the widespread declension and apostasy among many modern churches. May God enable us to worship our precious Saviour only in a manner authorized by His infallible Word.

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