

Is Christian Art forbidden by the 2nd Commandment?

Written by Calvin Fox

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Idolatry is forbidden by God. Are icons idols? Are icons forbidden by the Second Commandment? Are all works of art forbidden by God?

Exo 20:3 "You shall have no other gods before me, [i.e. - in front of me where I can see it or above me in importance]. "You shall not make for yourself a carved image [A (pesel) is an image that was carved out of wood or stone. The Law was concerned with a statue that would be made for the purpose of worship, an idol, and not any ordinary statue] or any likeness [The word (tymunah) refers to the pattern from which the (pesel) is constructed; It would convey "you shall not make an image, neither shall you conceive a form" for worship of anything that is in heaven above or that is on the earth beneath or that is in the water below. v.5 You shall not bow down to them or serve them, for I, the Lord, your God, am a jealous God, responding to the transgression of fathers by dealing with children to the third and fourth generations of those who reject me.

The context is God's jealousy, His insistence on absolute and undivided loyalty from the Israelites, His insistence that he alone be worshipped by Israel. What is forbidden is the worship of other gods instead of God. He will punish the Israelites who reject Him and bow down and worship any other god.

The Second Commandment and other texts very clearly forbid the making of idols or any work of art representing a false God that may become an object of worship. God alone is to be worshipped. Does that mean, that representations of God are acceptable and not forbidden? Is any work of art acceptable as long as it does not become an object of worship? Is reverence the same as worship? *Deut 4:15 Be very careful, then, because you saw no form at the time the Lord spoke to you at Horeb from the middle of the fire. v.16 I say this so you will not corrupt yourselves by making an image in the form of any kind of figure. This includes the likeness of a human male or female, v.17 any kind of land animal, any bird that flies in the sky, v.18 anything that crawls on the ground, or any fish in the deep waters of the earth. v.19 When you look up to the sky and see the sun, moon, and stars – the whole heavenly creation – you must not be seduced to worship and serve them, v.23 Be on guard so that you do not forget the covenant of the Lord your God that he has made with you, and that you do not make an image of any kind, just as he has forbidden you. v.24 For the Lord your God is a consuming fire; he is a jealous God*

This passage is a commentary on the Second Commandment and seems to forbid the making of all images and representations of anything, including God Himself. Notice especially v.15-

Be very careful, then, because you saw no form at the time the Lord spoke to you at Horeb from the middle of the fire. v.16 I say this so you will not corrupt yourselves by making an image in the form of any kind of figure.

The worship of God was not to include or involve any form (graven image) that would represent God. All other images are also forbidden.

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But why? Not because such “art” is innately wrong, but because of the high degree of probability that the Israelites could be seduced by the Art into worshipping it as a deity, even Art that was designed to image the true God.

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Cf Rom 1:22 Although they claimed to be wise, they became fools v.23 and exchanged the glory of the immortal God for an image resembling mortal human beings or birds or four-footed animals or reptiles.

That is exactly what Humanity did. Idolatry, the creation and worship of false Gods is the greatest evil in the Bible. But we need to beware of the deeper meaning of such idolatry. Making an image of God is an attempt to concretize Him, to objectify and therefore to control Him. This is the sin we are warned against here! (Christians have been doing that very thing in many ways throughout History, even seeking to “box” God in our Systematic Theologies and Liturgies- even within the confines of the Bible. When we treat some favorite Doctrine or Practice as though it were “set in stone“, we have created a graven image!) However, I still contend that religious Art, all Art, is not in itself evil. On the contrary, the ability to create Art of all kinds is a God-given gift with an invaluable function.

What is an Icon?

eikon [A-kOne] 23x - an image, figure, likeness; from *eiko* [i-ko] to resemble, be like or a copy of... The Greek word *eikon*

means an image or likeness of any kind. Anything that represents something else is an *eikon*

. “Icon” as a word is not synonymous with “idol”. Almost all of the Bible verses used against icons are actually about idols. Icons used to represent false gods would be idols. The worship of icons as idols is idolatry. There is an abundance of literature condemning Religious Art and the use of it in Christian Worship, all of it based on the Second Commandment and Deuteronomy 4. Here is a web site with a multitude of quotes from the Reformers and famous Theologians and Preachers

<http://backwoodspresbyterian.blogspot.com/search/label/Idolatry>

The Westminster Larger Catechism says this about the Second Commandment -

Q. 109. What are the sins forbidden in the second commandment?

A. The sins forbidden in the second commandment are, all devising, counseling, commanding, using, and anywise approving, any religious worship not instituted by God himself; tolerating a

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false religion; 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; all worshipping of it, or God in it or by it; the making of any representation of feigned deities, and all worship of them, or service belonging to them ...
[emphasis added]

The main concern for Protestant Iconoclasts today is specifically the matter of what constitutes acceptable worship. They usually advocate what is known as the Regulative Principle. Only what is specifically commanded by God to be part of His worship is to be allowed. Anything He has forbidden is not to be used. He forbids the use of any and all religious art. Therefore, we must reject them for use in our worship. It is as simple as that.

But, the sin condemned in Q. 109 (and the 2nd Commandment) is idolatry- worshipping false Gods! The Thesis of this essay is that the creation, use and enjoyment of Icons and Art as such, Christian or otherwise, is not the same as Idolatry or the worship of idols and false gods. I argue that Christian Art used in worship or church buildings or any other kind of Art as such is not forbidden by God. Quite the contrary, Icons and Art may very well glorify God and be pleasing in His sight.

All the texts against Idolatry could be, and have been, used to support the belief that all Religious Art is potentially dangerous and may lead people into Idolatry. Thus the smashing of statues, et al in Catholic churches by Protestants during the 16th Century Reformation and all the bare and plain "Meeting Houses" of the Puritans and early colonists in America. Certainly, there have been people who worship Art and artists. There have been "Christians" who have replaced Christ for the art or artist they have come to worship. But is such worship (and apostasy) necessary or inevitable? No.

The prohibitions in the Law do not prohibit all image making. They prohibit image or idol worship and they warn that we humans are always in danger of worshipping what we create. We are driven to be both artists and worshippers. When these drives meet, idolatry can be the result. The Law warns us of this danger and we must always beware that we do not worship the works of our hands. Artists are very prone to doing this very thing, but our desire and abilities to create come from God and are to be used for God. All we make is intended to reflect and image Him.