

Is it Wrong to Have PICTURES of Christ?

*Here is an eye-opening article from one of our ministers in
Great Britain. You will find it vitally interesting.
(1959 Ambassador College article by Ernest Martin)*

Recently a very popular book has been published in which a leading Protestant minister advocates concentrating upon a small picture of Christ while you are praying in order to give you the proper inspiration for prayer.

Today, God is so far off to most people, so it is thought, that one must have some representation of Christ, the Father or some saint in order to pray with reality. There are thousands of images, idols and pictures throughout the world—in homes, in Bibles, in churches—which are to remind people of Christ of some Biblical personage. Do we need such images?

Are Images or Pictures Sactioned by God?

The Bible expressly forbids the use of images in any form in the true worship of God. Notice Exodus 20:4, 5: “Thou shalt *not* make unto thee any graven image, *or likeness of anything that is in heaven above* [note, the command is against *any* likeness, no matter what form], or that is in the earth beneath, or that is in the water under the earth. Thou shalt not bow down thyself to them [it does not say worship them, but nearly to bow before them], nor SERVE them [or, to use them in service to the true God]”. This Second Commandment is primarily against the use of intermediate, material images,

or idols or pictures with which to worship the true God mentioned in the First Commandment. The worship of God must not be through images.

Most of you have already understood that the usage of images was wrong, but what about pictures? Does the Second Commandment specifically include them? Yes, it does! Notice that it says no likeness shall be made of heavenly things to be used in the worship of God. Likenesses are portrayed in pictures as well as through idols or other images. Pictures of Christ, then, are definitely forbidden.

Israel Told to Destroy Images and Pictures of Heathen

To carry out the enforcement of God’s Second Commandment, notice what God commanded the Israelites just before they entered the Promised Land: “Then ye shall drive out all the inhabitants of the land from before you, AND DESTROY ALL THEIR PICTURES, and destroy all their MOLTEN IMAGES, and quite pluck down all their high places” (Num. 33:52). Their pictures of heavenly things and their idols were considered one and the same. Idolatrous pictures and images are both forbidden by God. The Israelites were commanded to destroy them all.

Although the Israelites after moving into the Promised Land

did not totally abolish these forms of idolatry, we find that the Jews, after the Babylonian Captivity, about 450 B.C. did, in general, remove idolatrous worship from the land. They had been told by the prophets that their captivity was because of their idolatry and Sabbath breaking (Neh. 13:18). And after the Captivity, the Rabbis made the Sabbath one of the main commandments. Also, they legislated laws which were designed to separate the Jew from all appearances of idolatry. In fact, by the time of our Saviour, the making of sculptures or pictures was so unknown among the Jews that Caligula, the Roman Emperor, had to employ Phoenicians to make a statue of him to be put in Jerusalem because no Jew knew how to make one (Edersheim, *Life and Times*, pp. 89, 90). This was the condition of the pious Jew regarding image and picture making during the time of Christ. They carried the meaning of the Second Commandment to an extreme.

Early Christians Forbade Images and Pictures

Not only did Jesus teach the commandments of God (Matt. 19:16-22), but His apostles also did (I John 2:3, 4). It is not any wonder that those individuals converted by Christ and the apostles kept the commandments—including the Second. Dr. Farrar in

his monumental book “The Life of Christ as Represented in Art,” pages 5 and 6 says that early Christians of all ranks regarded the painting or representation of Christ as profanity and an act of irreverence. There is ample evidence to show that they took the same stand as the Jews as far as Art was concerned. They needed no images or pictures to remind them of Christ or the Father. Jesus had said that those who worship Him must do so “in Spirit and truth. The only mediator between man and the Father is Christ—there is no need of intermediate pictures or images.

This early abhorrence for images and pictures of the Father or Christ was so indelibly planted upon the minds of early Christians that for over 300 years after the death of the apostles, there was no official representation of deity made. It is true that a few heretical individuals (undercover—not openly) had sketched outlines of Christ in various places (to be mentioned later), but the vast majority of professing Christians—Catholics or otherwise, refrained from portraying anything connected with God until about the Fourth Century.

Early Catholic Officials Denounce Imagery As Idolatrous

Here is an example of how early Catholics looked upon the use of images and pictures of Christ.

In the year 326 A.D., one of the great Catholic leaders, Eusebius of Caesarea, showed great distaste for the request for a picture of Christ from the sister of Emperor Constantine. She had requested a picture to see how Christ looked. Notice what Eusebius wrote back

to her. “And since you have written about some supposed likeness of other of Christ, what and what kind of likeness of Christ is there? ... *Such images are forbidden by the second commandment.* They are *not* to be found in churches, and are forbidden among Christians alone” (Farrar, p. 56. This is striking testimony that even the Catholic Church at this time understood the laws of God on this matter. Farrar also records that Irenaeus, Clement, Origen and Lactantius, all of whom were high ranking Catholic officials, sternly condemned their use in any fashion. And, Irenaeus and Clement distinctly appeal to the Second Commandment as authority (p. 60).

Later, there was another Bishop of the Fourth Century, whom Catholic historians regard as one of the saintliest and most orthodox, who had an energetic abhorrence for anything resembling a sacred picture. This was Bishop Epiphanius of Salamis. Farrar records an excerpt from one of his letters to the Bishop of Jerusalem. It concerned a condition he found existing in the Jerusalem area. It appears that on a journey to Jerusalem, near Bethel, he had come upon a building in which he saw a lamp burning. On being informed the building was a church, he entered to pray ... He saw there a curtain which had on it (as he goes on to write), “an image, as it were, of Christ, or of some saint, for I cannot quite remember whose likeness it was. Horrified to see the likeness of a man, hanging *contrary to Scripture, in a Christian Church*, I tore it down and ordered the vergers (attendants) to use it as the shroud of some pauper” (See also Encyclopedia Britannica, 11th

edition, vol. 14, p. 272).

Yes, even in the Fourth Century, the majority of Catholic officials were vehemently against the violation of the Second Commandment. Although, from this example, you can see that some Bishops were beginning to allow pictures even in the churches.

By the end of the Fourth Century, because of the increased influx of pagan influence, the tide was beginning to be in favor of the use of pictures for worship. Augustine, at the beginning of the Fifth Century, “complains that he knew many worshippers of superstitious pictures” (Farrar, p. 59). Still, however, the majority was opposed to their use. Farrar goes on to say that about the year 600 A.D., there was one Serenus, Bishop of Massilia who “broke up pictures and images in churches.” This act of the Bishop’s reached the ears of Pope Gregory who disapproved “of his breaking them, though he commends his opposition to their idolatrous use” (p. 59).

Yes, there was still opposition to such violations of God’s law even this late in the Catholic Church. Even the Pope had to commend this Bishop for his motives. This plainly shows that a knowledge of what is right was known to the ones in authority. However, even this praise of opposition was soon to leave the officials in the Catholic Church.

So strong had paganistic influences entered the Catholic Church, that a Council of Catholic leaders was called in Constantinople in 691 A.D. in which they officially sanctioned the use of images and pictures in churches (Farrar, p. 100). There were some Bishops dissenting from this form of idola-

try, but the majority carried and the decree passed. This decree of the Catholic Church was in direct antithesis to the beliefs and practices of the same Church 300 years before when the early Church "Fathers" were in authority. The reason for this about-face was because of the unbridled paganistic ideals and philosophies that crept into that Church after the "conversion" of Constantine in the first part of the Fourth Century. So many doctrines of paganism had entered the Church, along with many Pagans themselves being converted, that she was forced to submit to the use of Pagan images and pictures, if she were to remain popular with the people. This, of course, she did. However, it was not until another Council of Constantinople in 842 A.D. that the last vestiges of opposition to images and pictures was stamped out. From that time, until the present, the Catholic Church has sanctioned images and the like in their churches. Some Protestants made a feeble attempt to reform the Catholic Church from this imagery in the reformation, but this they failed to do. In fact, the bulk of Protestants carried the representations of Christ in picture form, which came from Catholicism, directly into their churches. The pictures, mosaics and painting of Christ you see today in Protestant churches and in their literature, are direct developments of the ones used by Catholics.

How Was Christ Represented in Early Christian Art?

The Christ you see portrayed in pictures and images today is an effeminate looking individual with long hair and a beard. There are

some differences in portraying Him among the different artists, but generally He is the same.

But, is the common picture we are used to and the one the Protestants adopted from the Catholics, the way Christ actually appeared while on this earth? Did He have a beard and long hair?

The very first pictures found of Christ are painted on the walls of the Catacombs of Rome. Most of these pictures were painted during the Second and Third Centuries and, it might be added, outside of the approval of the Catholic Church. That Church, we have seen, did not allow such representation at this early date. And, it is true, they should not have been drawn, but still there is something interesting in them for us today, for they show Christ in an entirely different form that we are accustomed to seeing Him.

What Early Paintings Looked Like

The earliest pictures in these Catacombs, date from about 100 years after the apostles. And, whoever sketched them were undoubtedly acquainted with individuals who were familiar with the general appearance of Christ that came by word of mouth from the apostles. The most ancient of these pictures is described by Roderic Dunkerley in his book "Beyond the Gospels." He says: "In particular, there is a painting of the Resurrection of Lazarus in which Christ is shown—'youthful and beardless, with short hair and large eyes ... Although it is now only barely recognizable, this picture is of great interest since it is the oldest representation of Jesus that is preserved anywhere'" (p. 57).

Did you notice any difference from the common portrayals today? Christ is here depicted as young (He was around 33 when crucified) and *He is without a beard and with short hair*. Farrar, also speaking of these early portrayals of Christ, says, "He is almost invariably boyish and beardless ... *His hair is short*, His eye full of tenderness" (p. 43). These pictures are strikingly different from the "Christ" we see today in the churches of this land.

But, let us go on.

These early representations of Christ, being beardless and with short hair, persisted for a number of years. Dunkerley continues, "Reference may be made to another portrayal of Christ, dating from early in the third century. It was found on the wall of a house-chapel at Dura-Europos in the Syrian Desert in 1931-2 during excavations of Yale University and the French Academy of Inscriptions and Letters ... Here too He is young and *without a beard* and wearing the ordinary costume of the time" (p. 58). This picture was found near Palestine, and it corresponds with the portrayals of those found in Rome. The general appearance of Christ seems to have been known throughout the Roman world, and that Christ's appearance was not as we know it today. In fact, Farrar says, "During the first four hundred years there is probably no representation of Christ as bearded, or as a worn and weary sufferer" (p. 52). Dunkerley also agrees with this deduction, when he states, "It is not until the fourth century (after Christ) that the familiar bearded face appears" (p. 58). These are amazing statements. It took about 400 years to evolve the "Christ"

that we had been brought up to believe in. And, this “Christ” is not the one the early Christians thought of—the Christ of the Bible. This is the picture of a false Christ—the one the whole world worships.

Bible Proves Christ Did Not Wear Long Hair

The forgoing evidence should not surprise you who have studied your Bibles, for God’s word very plainly shows that a man should not wear long hair—it is a shame (I Cor. 11:14). Christ did not wear long hair, and—as the first pictures show—even the Catholics knew He did not wear a beard.

Some have erroneously assumed that Jesus was under a Nazarite vow (this was a vow of extreme humility) in which the hair should, for a period of time, grow long, but this is not so! Jesus was from the small town of Nazareth in Galilee and was called “Jesus of Nazareth,” but this had nothing to do with a Nazarite vow! And, the Scripture plainly shows that Christ was not a Nazarite while on this earth, for in Matthew 11:19 Jesus, Himself, stated that He came drinking wine. This was forbidden one under a Nazarite vow (Num. 6:3).

Also, another proof of this is Matthew 26:48, 49. Here it says Jesus had to be kissed in order for the soldiers to know which one He was. If Christ had been dressed as a Nazarite, with long hair and old clothes (in other words, out of the ordinary), the soldiers would have recognized Him without his being pointed out.

The disciples were also dressed like ordinary men because they were not fasting or under a

Nazarite vow (Matt. 9:14, 15). The Bible is plain on this matter. Christ and the disciples dressed like ordinary men. Christ did not have long hair, and the early pictures of Him show Him without long hair and without a beard.

Isaiah 50:6 refers not to Jesus but to Isaiah the prophet.

Where Did False Representations of Christ Come From?

The first paintings of Christ were just simple sketches. There seems to have been no outside influences directing how He should look. His general appearance was apparently common knowledge.

But, soon there began to creep into the Catholic Church a number of people who had been reared pagans. Along with them they brought many symbols of their art. These pagans began to blend their ideas with Biblical events. “Early Christian art,” says Professor Woltmann, “does not differ in its beginnings from the art of antiquity” (Farrar, p. 29). Concerning this fact, Farrar continues, “Christians had to baptize, as it were, all that could be baptized of the ancient heathen types. They themselves had been Pagans, and *were unaccustomed to any but Pagan decorations, into which they infused a new spirit*” (p. 29).

Notice it! The pagans brought with them into Catholic Church their old ideas on art and infused into them Christian significance. Yes, the pagans even went a step further than merely representing Christ in outline form (and even that was wrong). They brought in direct pagan decorations.

Of course, this was at first done undercover in the Third Century, because the Catholic Church

at this time still did not allow such things. But, nevertheless, paganism began to thrive throughout the Roman world under the guise of Christianity.

Pagan Gods Became Direct Representations of Christ

Yes, this subtitle is a shocking one to make, but it is fact! The pagans, instead of destroying their gods, turned them into Christ or other Biblical characters. They kept right on worshipping them, but calling them now by Christian names. “Of these types of Christ, *borrowed from Pagan antiquity*,” says Farrar, “the favourite was Orpheus taming the wild beasts, with his lyre” (p. 30). When the pagans were converted to Catholicism, they quit calling the pagan god Orpheus by his name of antiquity. Now, they called him Christ. They reasoned that it was all right because Christ will tame the wild beasts in the millennium as Orpheus does. So, the pagan god Orpheus became Christ. They continued to paint the image of Orpheus, but now it was Christ.

“*No Pagan symbol*, therefore, better accorded with their tone of mind than that which represented the youthful Orpheus bending the listening trees and charming the savage lions by his celestial harmonies. *It indicated Christ* as the King of Love and Peace, as the Law of life, and the Harmony of the world” (Farrar, pp. 33, 34).

Another authoritative work entitled “Wonders of the Past” pp. 1118, 9 also has some information on this subject. It states, “For the Christians, even in the earliest days, observed the customs of their ancestors, *though with a new intention*.” Continuing, “It (Art)

remains as it were *transformed*, seen with new eyes, and *drawn into the service of Christ*. Now notice this statement from this work: “Orpheus becomes a prophecy of Him (Christ); and the Good Shepherd (Christ) bears the lamb on His shoulders *precisely as Hermes* (a pagan god) had been wont to do, but with a new tenderness. The portrait of Christ,” the book continues, “is but seldom found, but when we do find a presentation of Him, He is represented as young and *BEARDED*, with a smile on His lips, splendid *AS APOLLO*” (p. 1119). Notice this! Here we find Christ represented with a BEARD—as you see Him portrayed today—and it is exactly as some ancient portrayals of the chief pagan god *APOLLO*. Need any more be said? Here is where the Christ of today comes from! It is nothing more than a portrait of a heathen god.

Farrar goes on to say, “Other Pagan symbols adopted by Christianity were those of the winged Psyche, the Sirens, and Hercules feeding the dragon with poppy seed. The story of Cupid and Psyche, of which there are several instances, was chosen as the emblem of God’s love for the soul” (p. 34). Yes, there were many pagan gods of the heathens and they brought them right into the Catholic Church when the pagans were “converted.” So numerous had these representations of Christ become, that by 691 A.D. (as stated before), the Catholic Church finally allowed them by official decree

to become a part of the religious service.

Because there were many of these pagan gods, they could not all represent Christ for all of them had slightly different appearances. Augustine, the Catholic official in the Fourth Century stated that there were “in his time, innumerable pictures of Christ, which were all different” (Farrar, p. 73). We finally see the solidification of these varying pictures (representing many pagan gods) into the *common one today*.

Actually, today’s representation is the blending together of the chief characteristics of major pagan gods. The wisest and most powerful of the gods were portrayed *with beards and long hair*. The hair and beard represented their ancient wisdom and godliness. This uniquely blended portrayal was the one finally sanctioned by the Catholic Church—it satisfied everyone. This is the very presentation of Christ that is extant in Catholic and Protestant churches today. Few realize that it is a direct representation of the chief of pagan gods. Truly, Satan has deceived the whole world (Rev. 12:9).

How Does Christ Actually Look Today?

Christ does not look like the pagan gods of Greece or Rome and as the world portrays Him today. There is no resemblance whatsoever. If you want a true Biblical picture of our Saviour,

turn to Revelation 1:13-16. There is the real Christ. It is a description that no artist could paint nor any sculptor mold. This is the Christ who has a face that shines as the sun in its full strength. He was so bright that John fell at His feet as dead when he saw Him (Rev. 1:17).

Here is Christ in His full power and glory—the Christ of the Bible. And this is the way He will appear when He comes back to this earth with all His glory (Matt. 24:30). Most people will be looking for a false Christ—the one pictured today. What a shock they will have when the REAL CHRIST is revealed!

Violating the Second Commandment?

In the light of these facts, we should ask ourselves if we are violating God’s commandments. Do we have pictures of this false Christ—the representation of pagan gods in our homes?—in our Bibles?

If we do have, we should do as God commanded the ancient Israelites in Numbers 33:52. “Destroy all their [the heathen’s] PICTURES, and destroy all their molten images, and quite pluck down all their high places.” Yes, so let each of us rid himself of any form of idolatry—this form of violating the Second Commandment. And, let us be about our Father’s business, by always being in obedience to His commandments (I John 2:3, 4).