

THE REFORMATION AND THE VISUAL ARTS

By

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To Linda
I love you, forever

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INTRODUCTION

Upon entering our sanctuary on Sunday morning, a large white cross dominates the central vision. It hangs above the baptismal waters and behind the pulpit. The church is styled in a traditional or federal fashion, designed to give a timeless quality. Along the right wall are five stained glass windows, three depicting scenes from Jesus' life: his baptism by John with a dove descending from above, his birth with his mother Mary, and the miracle of the feeding of the 5,000 complete with a blond-headed boy offering his lunch. Flanking these windows are smaller ones of written verses containing portions of 1 Corinthians 6:20 and 1 Peter 1:19, with an anchor below, and Romans 11:36 with the Greek letters alpha and omega. On the left are three companion windows which show Jesus' triumphal entry into Jerusalem, the empty tomb with an angel, and Jesus praying in the Garden of Gethsemane with his followers asleep. This group is flanked by more verses, John 10:11 with a sheep below, and John 11:25 with a stylized flame. During the worship service, after a standing prayer of confession is given, the people kneel and are led in prayer again. After singing hymns and praise choruses, a confession of faith is made in unison; the people kneel again and pray. A sermon is preached following the tenets of a reformed Baptist faith. If John Calvin were to witness these events, he would likely be quite displeased.

Most Christians give little thought to images. Our eyes are besieged by them daily. Occasionally, however, we are roused from our slumber when a particular image causes outrage. Place a crucifix in a beaker of urine or smear elephant dung on a picture of Mary and we are reminded of the great power of paint or clay or metal.

Likewise, images have played a major role throughout Christendom. The early church first adopted the use of images in catacombs and sarcophagi, developing an iconography of images which pointed to important statements about the miracles of Jesus, salvation, and rescue from near-death experiences. Specific imagery of Jesus developed to indicate his humanity and deity, sometimes borrowing from the surrounding Greco-Roman culture. Later, the great iconoclastic debates of the eighth century proved the remarkable role that images can play in theology. The use of icons in worship was central to the debates between the eastern and western branches of Christianity, but the foundational idea was the representation of Jesus (the God-man) in an image. Despite the biblical prohibition against an image of God, did the incarnation allow images of Jesus Christ? Although the question of icons contributed to the East-West split, both branches allowed images of Jesus. By the sixteenth century, images had proliferated throughout the West. Associated with the rising cult of the saints, including their reputed relics, the images were also used in lay piety. Unfortunately, widespread abuse occurred.

The Roman Catholic abuse of images led to fiery confrontations with the early Reformers, as they sought to reclaim salvation by faith and to re-direct worship to a “spiritual” level. Opposition to the use of images was widespread among the reformers, but ranged from tolerance of images (as long as they were not worshipped) by Luther, to the absolute opposition of religious imagery by Karlstadt. Zwingli’s opposition led to the removal of images in much of Switzerland, and Calvin opposed all imagery within the church in Geneva.

The beliefs on visual art of Martin Luther and John Calvin have had far-reaching and lasting effects. However, each man arrived at a different conclusion regarding the use

of art in the life of the church. Luther believed the arts to be within the realm of Christian freedom and allowed their use. In contrast, Calvin forbade visual arts in worship. Their divergent views were related to the differences in their reforming efforts, their individual backgrounds, their metaphysics and views on the transcendence of God, their interpretation of the second Commandment, their view of Christian freedom, their understanding of worship, the shift from a visual faith to a verbal faith, their understanding of body-spirit dualism, and their own personal use of art. Because their opinions on visual arts in the expression of the Christian faith still resonate today, analysis of their views remains important.

The reformers' biblical support for their views rested largely on their interpretation of Exodus 20:4-6 and John 4:24. Luther and Calvin adopted different numberings of the Ten Commandments, which led to different stresses of the prohibition of images of God as either an elaboration of the preceding verse (Exodus 20:3) or a separate and specific commandment. They interpreted the commandment, and the imagery commanded by God in the tabernacle and temple, in very different ways, which led to their differing beliefs on religious art. Their emphasis on the transcendence or immanence of God gave further support to each man's beliefs. After careful review, Luther's view seems most consistent with Scripture.

Although agreement with Luther's view may allow religious images, what sort of images can be permitted? Not every artistic endeavor is permissible. Images of the Father remain forbidden, but the Church has long held — and Scripture allows — that images of the Incarnate Son are permissible. Art can have a legitimate use in worship and faith of the believer, individually and corporately, but additional reflection is necessary to

provide guidelines for Christian art. The content, truth, and beauty of God must be reflected in art. Many artists in the past have achieved this lofty goal, and it is the challenge to the modern church to continue the grand tradition of art dedicated to the glory of God.

CHAPTER 1

CHRISTIAN ART BEFORE THE REFORMATION

Although art has been used in the Church throughout its history, there are three time periods which have significance to the Reformation. The first was the beginning centuries in the early church, which some Reformers claimed was aniconic, a claim since shown to be untrue.¹ A second period was the eighth century, which hosted the great iconoclastic controversy. The question of idolatry in the use of icons was thoroughly argued and defended — in response to questions similar to those raised by the Reformers. The third era, the century preceding the Reformation, was characterized by medieval art as a form of Roman Catholic piety. Many of the Reformers' disputes were directly related to the perceived excesses of that time.

Early Christian Art

Before 200 Christians did not produce anything that was “materially distinct, no art and no separate material culture in any form.”² The absence of material artifacts is best explained by the small number of believers and the lack of capital. Finney explains,

Christians produced nothing, including art in all the traditional categories: architecture, painting, sculpture, and the several minor arts. The reasons for the nonappearance of Christian art before 200 have nothing to do with principled aversion to art, with otherworldliness or with antimaterialism. The truth is simple and mundane: Christians lacked land and capital. Art required both.³

¹ Robin Margaret Jensen, *Understanding Early Christian Art* (New York: Routledge, 2005), 13.

² Paul Corby Finney, *The Invisible God* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1994), 101.

³ *Ibid.*, 108.

The earliest Christian art can be dated to the second or third century. These images are funereal, located in the catacombs of Rome⁴ or on sarcophagi. Christians began to bury their dead in subterranean tunnels at that time. The catacombs were not used as a place of refuge, but were visited by Christians who prayed at the sites of family tombs or, later, at the tombs of saints. By the fifth century, however, these catacombs were no longer used for burial and were subsequently forgotten.⁵ It was over one thousand years later that they were accidentally rediscovered in 1578. A complete exploration was not made until 1593 by Antonio Bosio,⁶ and he did not publish his book describing his findings until 1620. Thus, none of the Reformers could have known of the artwork associated with Christian burial sites. Their belief that the early church did not use images, and therefore, that the medieval church's use of art was a deviation from the early church fathers, cannot be substantiated. The catacombs and sarcophagi show that the early church did not avoid images.

Groups and Themes

The subjects depicted on the walls of the catacombs can be divided into four groups. First, subjects borrowed from the pagan religions were given new Christian meaning. These included images of the Good Shepherd, a fisherman, the seated philosopher, the praying person, depictions of meals, and harvest scenes. Most of these

⁴ However, Finney notes that Christian art appeared in various places at about the same time, including the catacombs of Rome and Naples, beneath a church in Cimitile, Italy, and within a necropolis in Alexandria in Finney, *Invisible God*, 151. Intaglios of Jonah and the crucifixion date from c. 400 or before as noted in *ibid.*, 112. Images in the Dura Baptistery in Syria date from 256 as shown in John Lowden, *Early Christian and Byzantine Art* (London: Phaidon Press Limited, 2005), 18.

⁵ *Michelin Green Guide Rome* (Watford, England: Michelin Tyre PLC, 1995), 46.

⁶ "Accidental Discovery of Catacombs," Christian History Institute, available from <http://chi.gospelcom.net/DAILYF/2001/05/daily-05-31-2001.shtml>

images have direct Greco-Roman parallels. Secondly, religiously neutral subjects were given Christian symbolic significance, including doves, peacocks (an allegory of resurrection), vines and grapes, fish, boats, anchors, lambs, and palm or olive trees. The third group consists of the most clearly Christian subjects and includes narrative images drawn from biblical stories. Popular choices were Jonah swallowed by the sea monster, Abraham offering Isaac, Noah in the ark, Moses striking the rock, Daniel with lions, Jesus' baptism, Jesus healing the paralytic, the shepherd carrying the sheep, and the multiplication of the loaves. The fourth group, portraits of Christ and the saints, occurred later.⁷

Finney divides the images differently and agrees that there is no evidence of a “narrative pictorial sequence, a story in pictures exhibiting a beginning, middle, and end”⁸ in the oldest chambers at Callistus. He groups the images into two themes:

Violent and dramatic forms of death: Abraham's near-sacrifice of his son, Jonah swallowed by a large sea monster, Daniel cast into a den of lions. The Israelites dying of thirst in the desert is a slightly less dramatic but equally threatening scenario. The frescoes illustrating the New Testament subjects also relate to deliverance, salvation, and redemption. This includes Lazarus raised from his tomb, the shepherd carrying the sheep, baptism, the fisherman, the paralytic, possibly also the orant [the praying person].⁹

With either grouping, two major themes are evident in the Callistus frescoes: the threat of death, yet a promise of deliverance which is guaranteed by a God who performs miracles.

⁷ Jensen, *Early Christian Art*, 17.

⁸ Finney, *Invisible God*, 198.

⁹ *Ibid.*, 198.

Symbolism and Significance of Images

On the ceilings of the catacomb rooms, the most prominent place was the center position, with the shepherd the most common image. The walls contain frescoes of both Old and New Testament scenes that related to deliverance, salvation and redemption. Finney notes that many of the images are biblically derived and therefore “symbol-specific”¹⁰ meaning the iconography carried a specific biblical message to the original viewer. In his treatise entitled *The Teacher* written around 200, Clement of Alexandria instructed believers who wore signet rings to choose engraved pictures such as a dove, fish, ship, anchor, or fisherman, “And if someone is fishing he will call to mind the apostle [Peter] and the children [baptizands] drawn up out of the water.”¹¹ For Clement, it was the intent of the buyer, not the maker of the ring, which was important. He thought symbolically and the pertinent issue was what the believer saw in the image.

Even though the image of the shepherd carrying a sheep (i.e. the Good Shepherd) is definitely not a Christian invention, it would have been understood in a specifically Christian way (John 10:11; Psalm 23:1).¹² Images appropriated from Greco-Roman prototypes or images which superficially appear non-specific would require the viewer to have an adequate knowledge with which to correctly interpret what they saw.¹³ To a non-Christian an image of two women near a tomb had no particular meaning, but a Christian would recognize the story of the two women approaching Christ’s tomb after his

¹⁰ Finney, *Invisible God*, 188.

¹¹ Clement, *Paed.* III.58.2-III.60.1, referenced in P. C. Finney, *Dumbarton Oaks Papers* 41 (1987), 181-86, quoted in Finney, *Invisible God*, 188.

¹² John Lowden, *Early Christian and Byzantine Art* (London: Phaidon Press Limited, 2006), 21.

¹³ *Ibid.*, 21.

resurrection (Matthew 28:1). Since the context of the catacomb images is funereal, the images were meant to provide hope in death and afterlife.¹⁴

Finney points to a long history of epistemologic evidence of ways of seeing, an inner noetic path and the outer route, which appeals to external evidence — “An image of the maker flows from the things made.”¹⁵ This manner of thinking was reinforced by the early apologists whose extensive literary use of visual metaphors provided the impulse for early Christian art.¹⁶ The second century apologist “laid both the literary and intellectual foundations for the great symbolists of the post-Constantine era.”¹⁷ But since God was invisible, he must be seen indirectly, through things and beings that he has caused to exist.

Likewise, before Constantine, sarcophagi were carved with the popular scenes of Jonah (the most frequent image), Noah, Adam and Eve, Daniel, the offering of Isaac, and the raising of Lazarus. Old Testament themes are four times more common than the New Testament. What is the significance of these images? These frescoes and relief carvings have “more to do with its referential power than with its narrative details.”¹⁸ Jensen notes that these images are “tied to textual sources, they should not be understood as mere illustrations or picture bibles for the unlettered.”¹⁹ In other words, the choice of images reflected current theological thought and emphasis. A prime example is the artistic efforts to combat Arianism which gave Jesus the symbolic signs of deity.

¹⁴ Finney, *Invisible God*, 185.

¹⁵ *Ibid.*, 278.

¹⁶ *Ibid.*, 290.

¹⁷ *Ibid.*, 279.

¹⁸ Jensen, *Early Christian Art*, 66.

¹⁹ *Ibid.*, 17-19.

Mathews notes that miracles are the core and the mainstay of early Christian imagery. Thus, paintings of the raising of Lazarus, the delivery of Jonah and the healing of the paralytic emphasize Jesus' ability to perform these wonders. The depiction of miracles was part of an effort to show the superiority of Christ's miracles over the magic of the pagans. The repetition of the miracles is striking; the same scenes are frequently repeated. But the miracles were "repeated not because the artists ran out of things to say, but because these subjects said what they wanted to say, and said it perfectly."²⁰

Salvation paradigms are repeated throughout the catacombs: Moses strikes the rock with his wand bringing fresh water to God's people, God delivers Isaac from Abraham's imminent sacrifice, and a baptizand is given new life.²¹ Other scenes, such as Daniel with lions and three youths in the fiery furnace, seem to refer directly to protection in danger with subsequent deliverance. Symbolic references to the sacraments, such as allusions to the Eucharist (Jesus' miracle of the multiplication of the loaves of bread) and baptism are less common than other images²² probably because the catacombs were a setting for neither.²³

The Humanity of Jesus Christ

Depictions of Jesus in ancient art are surprisingly variable. Some images may have been drawn from Greco-Roman myths, as these stories displayed some aspect of Jesus' life or character. He appeared as a young Roman and as a mature bearded adult.

²⁰ Mathews, *Clash of Gods*, 62. Mathews concludes that the depiction of Jesus performing miracles was to show his superiority over pagan magic. However, Jesus' miracles were likely painted simply to show his supernatural power.

²¹ Finney, *Invisible God*, 216.

²² Jensen, *Early Christian Art*, 87.

²³ Finney, *Invisible God*, 185.

These two different images of Jesus — one youthful, the other mature — were used to emphasize different attributes or activities. His youthful depiction occurred most commonly in acts of healing or working wonders, while more mature images stress his sovereignty over the universe. Jensen hypothesizes that these contrasting representations were drawn from the Greek and Roman mythology, especially Orpheus and Jupiter respectively, as Jesus (through his deeds) now challenged and replaced the old gods.²⁴ In third and fourth century art, Jesus appears as the Good Shepherd, possibly borrowed from the visual representations of Orpheus (perhaps serving as a metaphorical reference). In the catacombs, Jesus appears as a philosopher, seated and holding a scroll. He also performs miracles, holding a wand (the ancient symbol of “magic”) and cures the sick and raises the dead.²⁵ Mathews explains that “the variability of images of Christ in the

²⁴ Jensen, *Early Christian Art*, 120. The relationship between early Christian imagery and Greco-Roman mythological depictions is debatable and sometimes superficial. However, some remarkable similarities exist. The depictions of Jonah and Endymion can appear strikingly similar. Compare the sarcophagi from Santa Maria Antiqua in Rome from the third century with the Roman sarcophagus from The Metropolitan Museum of Art in New York, where the repose of Jonah and the repose of Endymion appear essentially identical (Mathews, *Clash of Gods*, 32). Also similar to the sarcophagi imagery are the depictions of Jonah under the gourd vine in the Callistus catacombs (Jensen, *Early Christian Art*, 69), and the third century Jonah sarcophagus in the Vatican Museum in Rome, (Lowden, *Early Christian and Byzantine Art*, 31).

Likewise, the Good Shepherd has striking Greco-Roman parallels and the Christian version appears to be a direct copy. Compare the Callistus catacomb fresco (Jensen, *Early Christian Art*, 10), the Good Shepherd fresco on the ceiling of the Catacomb of Priscilla in Rome from the third century, (Lowden, *Early Christian and Byzantine Art*, 28), and the Via Salaria Sarcophagus from the third century in the Vatican Museum in Rome (Lowden, *Early Christian and Byzantine Art*, 31) with the Good Shepherd (Roman, first century) sculpture in the exhibit *From the Ashes of Vesuvius, In Stabiano: Exploring the Ancient Seaside Villas of the Roman Elite*, at the Dallas Museum of Art, October, 2007.

However, most Christian imagery does not seem to be as dependent on Greek or Roman imagery as Jonah and the Good Shepherd. Jensen’s statements seem far more speculative in the relationships of Orpheus to Jesus. Orpheus is often depicted with a lyre, in a Phrygian cap with sheep or wild beasts nearby (Jensen, *Early Christian Art*, 41). Jesus and the Good Shepherd imagery seems only minimally related to such depictions. The mature, bearded Jesus is likened to Jupiter who also has flowing hair and a beard. But other pagan deities are similarly pictured and it seems speculative to link the mature Jesus as a “replacement” to the chief Roman god on the basis of such non-specific imagery.

²⁵ *Ibid.*, 194.

early centuries stems not from an uncertainty about his identity so much as from curiosity about exploring *all* of his identity (italics his).”²⁶

Jesus is also portrayed in images drawn from the biblical narrative; he is shown working miracles, healing or teaching. In depictions of his baptism, Jesus is shown child-sized and naked, perhaps because early church baptismal candidates were also naked at their baptism. Otherwise, Jesus is shown adult-size and appears as any young Roman man — beardless, with short hair, and dressed in a tunic.²⁷ In the Catacomb of Peter and Marcellinus,²⁸ the fresco of Jesus raising Lazarus shows Jesus holding a wand as tiny, bound Lazarus emerges from a Roman tomb.²⁹ Depictions of Jesus performing miracles are also seen on sarcophagi where he is shown healing the woman with the issue of blood, curing the blind man, and raising Lazarus. Mathews notes that the repetition of the healing miracles implies that people identified with Jesus most often as a “miracle-man.”³⁰

Jesus’ humanity is apparent in his ordinary stature and physical appearance in the frescoes, but his actual appearance was obviously speculative since Scripture gives no detailed physical description. The pagan philosopher Celsus pointed that Jesus was short and “ill-favored.” Jensen writes of Origen’s rebuttal to Celsus,

Origen presumes that Celsus knew only the text from Isaiah, ‘He had no form nor comeliness that we should look at him, and no beauty that we should desire him’ (Isaiah 53:2b). Origen countered that the Psalmist spoke of the ‘mighty one’ as the fairest of the sons of men (Psalm 45:2). Moreover, Origen cites Jesus’ altered appearance in the Transfiguration to conclude that it is a subject of wonder that Jesus’ physical appearance has so many variations and is so capable of

²⁶ Jensen, *Early Christian Art*, 142.

²⁷ *Ibid.*, 95.

²⁸ Marcellinus was Pope from 296-304.

²⁹ Jensen, *Early Christian Art*, 76. Obviously, exact representational detail was not followed!

³⁰ Mathews, *Clash of Gods*, 61. Mathews’ stress on Jesus as a “miracle man” seems to trivialize his supernatural power. His miracles were not performed simply to impress his followers.

transformation, at one time having an ignoble form and unprepossessing appearance. Thus Christ is both free and able to appear in different guises, including that of judge and mother, as we are free to envision Christ in these different ways.³¹

Mathews believes that the early writers thought “that he [Jesus] had many different appearances depending on who was perceiving him,”³² and that this belief may account for the marked variability in Jesus appearance in early art, especially in reference to his age. These varying portraits were designed to “capture the reality of the divine presence.”³³ Jensen quotes Cyril of Jerusalem in a lecture to baptismal candidates,

The Savior comes in various forms to each person according to need. To those who lack joy, he becomes a vine; to those who wish to enter in, he is a door; for those who must offer prayers, he is a mediating high priest. To those in sin, he becomes a sheep, to be sacrificed on their behalf. He becomes ‘all things to all people’ remaining in his own nature what he is. For so remaining, and possessing the true and unchanging dignity of Sonship, as the best of physicians and caring teachers, he adapts himself to our infirmities.³⁴

Because of his humanity, Jesus was radically different from the pagan gods in another way. In coming to earth and being concerned with our mundane problems of blindness and arthritis, he showed himself to be a caring God: “Now suddenly God was *seen* walking among his people, touching, stroking, comforting, pressing his warm and life-giving hands on them...(italics his)”³⁵ And art developed to display this wonder.

³¹ Jensen, *Early Christian Art*, 127. She identifies Origen’s quotes from Origen, *Contra Cels.* 6.75-7.

³² Mathews, *Clash of Gods*, 138. However, Mathews likely goes too far in his attempt to explain the various images of Jesus. He alludes to Gnostic writings and apocryphal books (and non-orthodox interpretations of Galatians 3:28) as explanations of depictions of Jesus which appear feminine or at various ages.

³³ Jensen, *Early Christian Art*, 128.

³⁴ Cyril of Jerusalem, *Cat. lec.* 10.5, trans. adapted (to use gender inclusive language) from A. Stephenson, *The Works of Saint Cyril of Jerusalem*, vol. 1 (Washington, DC: Catholic University Press, Fathers of the Church Series, 1969), 198, quoted in Jensen, *Early Christian Art*, 128.

³⁵ Mathews, *Clash of Gods*, 92.

The Deity of Jesus Christ

Jesus' divinity does not appear to be emphasized in the earliest Christian art, although his performance of miracles may point to his divine majesty and power. Overall, the early images of Jesus seem to omit clear reference to him as the unique Son of God or as the Divine Ruler. However, after the victory of Constantine and the council of Nicaea, that changed.³⁶

After Constantine triumphed and adopted Christianity, a new visual message emerged. As Jensen writes,

This new iconography was designed to emphasize the glory, power, and majesty of this triumphant religion, perhaps subtly associating it with the power and triumph of the Roman Imperium, or (alternatively) directly contrasting it with dying aspects of Roman traditional paganism and the old gods, and maybe even the imperial cult itself.³⁷

The images used in the early church were not simply illustrative, but often “played an exegetical function — if only in the matter of choice which episodes were portrayed, and in what narrative sequence.”³⁸ Thus, the images were chosen to emphasize certain texts or attributes which were also being stressed in written texts of the time.

A remarkable example occurred after the first church council, called by Constantine in 325 and held in Nicaea, which attempted to resolve the question of Jesus'

³⁶ It must be stressed that the changes in the visual representations of Jesus were not indicative of a change in theology. The Apostles and the Patristic writers were unanimous in their belief in orthodox Christian doctrine. Thus, although the *images* of Christ showed a change in emphasis after Nicaea, the underlying *theology* had remained unchanged.

³⁷ Jensen, *Early Christian Art*, 98. Admittedly, there was far greater opportunity and financing for Christian buildings and art work after the conversion of Constantine, but whether it was new iconography or new opportunity which developed is less certain. Jensen also speculates on the relationship between rising influence of the Christian faith and its expression in art with the old imperial cult and paganism, but this relationship has been long debated. Her theory may have some validity, but is controversial.

³⁸ *Ibid.*

full divinity raised by Arius. In opposing the heresy of Arius,³⁹ Nicaea denounced Arianism and confirmed the full deity of Christ: Not only was Jesus fully man, he was fully God,

I believe in one God the Father Almighty; Maker of heaven and earth and of all things visible and invisible. And in one Lord Jesus Christ, the only-begotten Son of God, begotten of the Father before all worlds. God of God, Light of Light, very God of very God, begotten not made, being of one substance with the Father, by whom all things were made; who, for us men and for our salvation, came down from heaven, and was incarnate by the Holy Ghost of the Virgin Mary, and was made man...⁴⁰

But Arianism was rampant throughout the empire. This conflict was at the forefront of the theological debate of the time, but the visual arts, like the pronouncement at Nicaea, reflected the confirmation of Jesus' deity.⁴¹

Thus, the halo was added to representations of Jesus around the middle of the fourth century to indicate his divine nature. It is noteworthy that the first occurrence of Christ in an aureole was also accompanied by an explicitly anti-Arian inscription.⁴² Mathews notes that this new thrust of Christian art in the fourth century aimed at advertising the declaration of Nicaea that Jesus was "God of God, light of light, true God of true God, begotten not made, of one substance with the Father."⁴³ The halo (the aureole or mandorla⁴⁴ were used less often) was borrowed from Greek art as a symbol of divinity and was applied initially only to Jesus. Later it was used on Christian saints, but

³⁹ Arius had proclaimed that "the Son of God was a created being, made from nothing: there was a time when he had no existence and he was capable of change and of alternating between good and evil." He was denounced as a blasphemer. Bruce Shelley, *Church History in Plain Language* (Dallas: Word Publishing, 1982), 116.

⁴⁰ Shelley, *Church History*, 116.

⁴¹ The emphasis of Nicaea as a turning point is overstated. The truths of Nicaea had always been accepted by the Church, but the debate may have given emphasis to the *visual* depiction of Jesus as God.

⁴² Mathews, *Clash of Gods*, 53.

⁴³ *Ibid.*

⁴⁴ The aureole was a radiance that surrounded the head (like a halo) or the entire body. The mandorla was a lozenge-shaped disc bordered with concentric bands of color which surrounded the entire figure, not just the head. The mandorla did not originate from Roman art, but from India where the Buddha was frequently represented in that manner (Mathews, *Clash of Gods*, 117).

Jesus' halo was always distinguished by incorporating the Greek cross, a chi-rho monogram, or the letters alpha and omega.⁴⁵ Fourth century mosaics also show Christ in a halo and glowing golden robe, distinguishing him from his companions and ordinary citizens.⁴⁶ Such artistic statements were not meant to “make an emperor of him,”⁴⁷ but were purposely divine and pointedly anti-Arian.

These images of Jesus were linked to the cultural concepts of deity of the early church, such that certain physical characteristics automatically signified divinity to the ordinary (and orthodox) viewer. These “artistic markers” were a kind of shorthand.⁴⁸ For example, loose long hair was a mark of divinity in Greek and Roman art, as were haloes, golden robes and thrones, all of which were used by the artist to indicate the divinity of Christ.⁴⁹ Through the use of the various divine markers, “Christ stole the look of the gods with whom he was in competition.”⁵⁰

By the sixth century, much later than the catacombs of Callistus, three different types of Christ's face dominate imagery,

A young-man type with a rather triangular head, short hair reaching only to the ears and a short beard; an old-man type with long white hair and pointed beard; and the Blessing Christ, commonly called the Pantokrator type, first witnessed in the famous Sinai icon. It is this last type, adapted in coinage and monumental mosaics, that eventually came to predominate, determining our notion of the savior down to modern times. Here a Christ with a broad forehead and heavy neck wears a great mass of dark hair and a full but fairly short beard.⁵¹

⁴⁵ Jensen, *Early Christian Art*, 112.

⁴⁶ Mathews, *Clash of Gods*, 101.

⁴⁷ *Ibid.*

⁴⁸ *Ibid.*, 126.

⁴⁹ *Ibid.*, 109, 126.

⁵⁰ *Ibid.*, 185.

⁵¹ *Ibid.*, 183. Mathews concludes his paragraph, “The potency of this type had nothing to do with its portrait accuracy; it was more potent because of its divine pagan associations with the father of the gods [Jupiter].” This statement seems more based on conjecture than fact.

Absence of Certain Images

The early Christians did not make images of God the Father, but they did illustrate God the Logos, although initially the images were “under the guise of generic types (shepherds, for example) that were already well established within the Greco-Roman iconographic repertory.”⁵² The historical record also reflects an absence of images of the nativity or resurrection until the fifth century. Likewise, graphic images of the crucifixion were late in appearance, but the reason for this delay is uncertain. Earlier symbols reflected a more metaphorical representation of the cross in the form of an anchor or tree, providing an indirect reference to the crucifixion.⁵³ The early Christians may have considered the crucifixion to be too disturbing or too powerful (or too embarrassing) and wished to conceal it from the unbelieving world. The eventual appearance of images of Christ crucified can be traced to Helena, Constantine’s mother. She “identified” the actual cross of Jesus’ crucifixion in 326. The first crucifixion images were probably a by-product of her discovery and the subsequent pilgrimages to the Holy Land.⁵⁴ The fifth century council of Chalcedon (451) provides an example of the influences of theological debate and the art of the time. Chalcedon confirmed that Jesus existed as one person in two natures, which condemned the heresy of Nestorius. Since Jesus’ deity could not suffer (because God is impassive), there was initial reluctance to represent the crucifixion realistically. Thus, a lamb was often substituted for Jesus, or he was depicted on the cross as alive and in no obvious pain. Later depictions were much more realistic and showed him in great agony. Not all of these changes reflected

⁵² Finney, *Invisible God*, 290.

⁵³ Jensen, *Early Christian Art*, 137.

⁵⁴ *Ibid.*, 150.

theological positions, and some may have been influenced by popular piety.⁵⁵ Unlike some images which were based on Greco-Roman mythological figures or on contemporary cultural references, images of resurrection were entirely based on Scripture.

Art as a “Bible for the Illiterate”

The use of images for instruction of the illiterate poor was proposed by Paulinus of Nola in the fifth century. It became a part of Roman church doctrine in 599 when Gregory the Great wrote a letter to Serenus, an iconoclastic bishop from Marseille. Gregory agreed with Serenus that images should not be worshipped, but if the images were placed on church walls, then the illiterate could understand what they could not read in books. Gregory wrote, “In pictures, those can read who do not know letters. The picture serves such people especially as reading material. What had been placed in church not for prayer but alone for teaching must not be destroyed.”⁵⁶

The early church did not view religious art as forbidden. Neither was it merely illustrative, nor did it serve simply as a memory aid, nor as a “Bible for the illiterate.” Furthermore, the artwork was reflective of theological issues of the day and served to interpret Scripture, just as the early church used the written word to provide commentaries on Scripture and theological debates. The utilization of images similar to pagan deities or secular symbols was not indicative of pagan influence upon Christianity,

⁵⁵ Jensen, *Early Christian Art*, 153.

⁵⁶ Gregory I, *Sancti Gregorii Magni Epistolarum*, Lib. ix, Epist. 13; PL, LXXVII, col. 1128; trans. Caecilia Davis-Weyer, *Early Medieval Art 300-1150* (Toronto, 1986), 48, quoted in Joseph Leo Koerner, *The Reformation of the Image* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2004), 137.

but rather the “Christianization of pagan art.”⁵⁷ Moreover, the church did not feel bound to a rigid iconography and was free to have different depictions of Christ. The early art crystallized certain points of doctrine and, together with the verbal exegesis, served to reinforce each other.⁵⁸ Finney agrees and concludes that “with twin roots in Byzantium and Reformation Europe, nineteenth-century scholarship invented a picture of early Christianity as a religion of uncompromising hostility to the representational arts, painting and sculpture. Early Christians were represented as ...iconophobes in theory, aniconic in practice.”⁵⁹ He believes this error occurred because the absence of very early art was wrongly interpreted as opposition to art and he reflects that “absence of evidence is just that, no evidence, silence — the latter is always difficult to interpret but should never be confused with negative evidence, which is quite another thing.”⁶⁰

The Iconoclastic Debate of the Eighth Century.

Early Christian art took many of its motifs from the secular art of Rome. Parallels with pagan figures were evident; the Good Shepherd looked like Apollo or Hermes, Jesus enthroned appeared similar to Jupiter, and divine beings with haloes were echoed in Jesus with a halo. These efforts reflected the use of current art injected with new meaning, but gradually, Christian art began to develop a distinctive style. William Dyrness has observed that the two branches of Christianity chose divergent paths regarding artistic

⁵⁷ Leonid Ouspensky and Vladimir Lossky, *The Meaning of Icons*, trans. G. R. H. Palmer and E. Kadloubovsky (Crestwood, New York: St. Vladimir’s Seminary Press, 1999), 28.

⁵⁸ Jensen, *Early Christian Art*, 182.

⁵⁹ Finney, *Invisible God*, 290.

⁶⁰ *Ibid.*

styles. While the Western church did more to adapt images from the surrounding culture, “the Eastern Church did more to develop its own iconic vocabulary.”⁶¹

Literary sources indicate that icons were being made in the late fourth century, and the first reports of resistance to images were soon recorded. John Chrysostom owned a portrait of Paul on his desk to inspire him when he wrote homilies. Around the same time, Eusebius and Epiphanius of Salamis wrote of their reservations about images. Although Eusebius (263?-c340) was antagonistic to icons, he described in detail a statue of Jesus he had seen in Paneas, erected by the woman with an issue of blood who had been healed by Jesus (Matthew 9:20-33). He also reported, “I have seen a great many portraits of the Saviour, of Peter and of Paul, which have been preserved up to our times.”⁶² By the seventh century, figures had become tall, thin, and flat. Faces appear rather mask-like, and clothing was depicted as a mere pattern of lines. These changes were not merely stylistic; they were adopted to convey the reality of the divine presence in the lives of the saints and the deity of Jesus. Thus, the icon originated and became a focus of prayer and spiritual reflection in the Eastern Church as “a two way door of communication.”⁶³

The purpose of icons in the Eastern Church is to show us the incarnate God.

Lynette Martin quotes Nicholas Gendle to explain the images which are

an essential medium through which the holy may be approached and grace channeled, like a two-way mirror...The icon is the real equivalent to, and venerated with the same honor as, the Gospel. The one communicates religious

⁶¹ William A. Dyrness, *Visual Faith* (Grand Rapids: Baker Academic, 2001), 32.

⁶² Eusebius, *History of the Church*, Book VII, ch. 18.; P. G. 20, col. 680, quoted in Ouspensky, *Meaning of Icons*, 25.

⁶³ Lynette Martin, *Sacred Doorways* (Brewster, Massachusetts: Paraclete Press, 2002), 2, 8-10.

truth through words, the other through visible forms and symbols. Both equally are modes of revelation.⁶⁴

The meaning of icons is obscure to many western Christians. It is an ancient art form in which an image is created on a wooden panel by using an encaustic technique of pigments embedded in wax. Strict guidelines are followed regarding the image itself, and liberal expression by the artist is not allowed. Certain longstanding symbols are used — haloes to indicate holiness, a thin nose, small mouth, and large eyes to display the saint's “refined” senses.⁶⁵ The icon is not identical to most western images, which usually serve as a reminder of persons or events, perhaps with a goal of increasing piety. The icon, however, is distinct, “The symbol is not in the iconography, not *what* is represented, but in the method of representing, in *how* it is represented. In other words, the teaching of the church is transmitted not only by the theme, but also by the mode of expression (italics his).”⁶⁶ The icon is believed to present “the same truth as the Gospels, and like the Gospels, is based on exact concrete data, and in no way on invention, for otherwise it could not explain the Gospel nor correspond to them.”⁶⁷ Furthermore, the icon is placed on the same level as the Scripture and the Cross as a form of revelation and knowledge of God. The purpose of the icon is to guide emotion, reason, and all human faculties on the way to transfiguration because an icon is “an external expression of the transfigured state of man, of his sanctification by uncreated Divine light.”⁶⁸ Thus, the role of the icon is not simply to preserve the memory of the one depicted, but to portray a spiritual realism.⁶⁹ Its

⁶⁴ Nicholas Gendle, *Catalogue: Icons in Oxford* (Oxford: Christ Church, 1980), page not specified, quoted in Martin, *Sacred Doorways*, 13.

⁶⁵ Ouspensky, *Meaning of Icons*, 38.

⁶⁶ *Ibid.*, 29.

⁶⁷ *Ibid.*, 30.

⁶⁸ *Ibid.*, 38.

⁶⁹ *Ibid.*, 41.

purpose was to allow the worshipper to access the divine reality, whereas in the West, an image “occupied real space, creating a stimulus for devotion.”⁷⁰ Moreover, an icon is not a portrait, but a “deified prototype...an image not of corruptible flesh, but of flesh transfigured, radiant with Divine light.”⁷¹ The difference between an Eastern icon and a Western image is reflected in their different views on salvation. For the West, “salvation was understood in terms of reconciliation with God through the cross, rather than as a spiritual communion with God (as in the East).”⁷²

In the depiction of the Persons of the Trinity, there are no icons of God the Father because of Exodus 33:20 and John 1:18.⁷³ In Orthodox theology, appearances of God in the Old Testament are theophanies of the preincarnate Christ. The Holy Spirit is depicted as a dove in icons such as *The Baptism of Christ* or the *Annunciation*, where He is coming down to Mary. In icons of Pentecost, the Holy Spirit is shown as twelve rays of “power or flame, one on the head of each apostle.”⁷⁴

Eastern Orthodox theology stresses that “once God became man, it was necessary to represent Him as man.” Therefore, icons of Christ are essential, but the icon does not depict the Savior in “either His Divine or His human nature, but His Person in which both these natures are incomprehensibly combined.”⁷⁵ The icon is not consubstantial but has a

⁷⁰ Dyrness, *Visual Faith*, 41.

⁷¹ Ouspensky, *Meaning of Icons*, 36.

⁷² Dyrness, *Visual Faith*, 33.

⁷³ Martin, *Sacred Doorways*, 148.

Exodus 33:19-20, “And the LORD said, ‘I will cause all my goodness to pass in front of you, and I will proclaim my name, the LORD, in your presence. I will have mercy on whom I will have mercy, and I will have compassion on whom I will have compassion. But,’ he said, ‘you cannot see my face, for no one may see me and live.’” All biblical quotations in this paper will cite the NIV unless otherwise noted.

John 1:18, “No one has ever seen God, but God the One and Only, who is at the Father's side, has made him known.”

⁷⁴ *Ibid.*, 149.

⁷⁵ Ouspensky, *Meaning of Icons*, 32.

different nature. Between the icon and Christ exists “a known connection, a certain participation of the one with the other.” Ouspensky further comments that,

This point constituted the fundamental difference between the Orthodox and the iconoclast. The iconoclasts regarded the images as consubstantial with the original having one and the same nature with it. Starting from this premise, they came to theological conclusion that the only possible icon of Christ is the Eucharist. [The iconoclasts argued that] Christ deliberately chose, as an image of His Incarnation, bread, which bears no likeness to man, in order to prevent idolatry; [whereas the iconodules⁷⁶ countered that] nothing was more alien to Orthodox worshippers of icons than to identify the icon with the person it represented. Those who do not understand the difference are justly called idolaters.⁷⁷

The rise of Islam played a critical role in the Iconoclastic controversy in the Christian church. By 722, the Caliphate had conquered the former Byzantine provinces of the North Africa and the Levant. Such an unexpected disaster demanded an explanation. If Christians were God’s chosen people, why had God abandoned them to the Muslims? Since Islam forbade any image of animals, people, or God, Byzantine Emperor Leo III believed the answer was the idolatry of icons. Therefore, he banned all icons in 726 and ordered their destruction. Martin notes, “There can be no doubt that it was the imperial decision alone that began and carried through the destruction of sacred art.”⁷⁸ For more than a century, making or owning an icon was forbidden. Destruction of almost all ancient icons was accomplished. The earliest surviving icons date from the sixth century and were spared only because they were located in the remote St. Catherine monastery in Sinai.⁷⁹ Mosaics and wall paintings were whitewashed, hacked down, or defaced. Icons

⁷⁶ An iconodule is “one who serves images.”

⁷⁷ Ouspensky, *Meaning of Icons*, 32, footnote 4.

⁷⁸ Martin, *Sacred Doorways*, 12.

⁷⁹ *Ibid.*, 8.

on wood or textiles were burned. Only religious art was forbidden; secular art continued as it had for centuries.

The iconoclastic controversy raised two issues: Are images of God (or animals or people) permissible, and can the function and veneration of icons be substantiated? Similar questions would be asked of Roman Catholic images by Luther, Calvin, and their contemporaries 800 years later. During the eighth century the most articulate spokesman in favor of images was John of Damascus. Regarding images, John viewed the iconoclastic attack as a threat to something central to the faith — the Incarnation. Since the Son of God took on a material body, Christians cannot hold to a position despising matter, for that betrays an inclination towards Manichaeism.⁸⁰ The invisible God assumed the form of a man to become fully God and fully man. Therefore, John can say, “I do not depict the invisible divinity, but I depict God made visible in the flesh.”⁸¹ Anticipating the emphasis of “spiritual” worship of the Swiss Reformers, John castigates that position,

If you say that God ought to be apprehended spiritually, then take away everything bodily, the lights, the fragrant incense, even vocal prayer, the divine mysteries themselves that are celebrated with matter, the bread, the wine, the oil of chrismation, the form of the cross. For these are all material: the cross, the sponge, the reed, the lance that pierced the life-bearing side. Either take away the reverence offered to all these...or do not reject the honor of the images... I venerate what I see, not as God, but as an honorable image of those worthy of honor.⁸²

Regarding veneration, John carefully distinguishes between two types, “The veneration of worship is one thing, veneration offered in honor to those who excel on

⁸⁰ St. John of Damascus, *Three Treatises on the Divine Images*, trans. Andrew Louth (Crestwood, New York: St. Vladimir’s Seminary Press, 2003), 11.

⁸¹ *Ibid.*, 22.

⁸² *Ibid.*, 42-43.

account of something worthy is another.”⁸³ Men offer honor to kings and generals (just as Joseph’s brothers “bowed down to him with their faces to the ground.” Genesis 42:6), but this is not worship. In the orthodox mind, the Greek word *proskynesis* (proskunesij) “properly refers to an *action*, the action of bowing down to the ground (italics his).”⁸⁴ The exclusive worship offered to God is *latreia* (latreía). Unlike John Calvin, in the Orthodox mind, actions do not necessarily equate with worship.

The significance of the iconoclastic debates of the eighth century to the Reformation of the sixteenth century is that some similarities arise in the presence and use of religious images. John of Damascus argued forcefully for the use of images, based on the Incarnation of the Son of God.⁸⁵ Furthermore, he rejected an overly “spiritual” nature of worship. Finally, he defended a distinction between honor or veneration given to a religious object and the worship that is due God alone.

Roman Catholic Medieval Art and Lay Piety.

The increase in piety of the Middle Ages was an expression of lay fervor. There had been steady interest in piety among the non-clerical public for three hundred years. The addition of rood screens between the altar and the people had blocked “all but the most fleeting views of the Mass,”⁸⁶ and the laity’s access to God was very much controlled and limited by the church and its clergy. The people longed for books that would parallel those used by the priests, from which they prayed daily. The Book of

⁸³ John of Damascus, *Three Treatises*, 25.

⁸⁴ *Ibid.*, 11.

⁸⁵ The focus of John’s statements here deals with the proper use of images based on Christ’s Incarnation. I have not attempted to fully explain the nature of icon veneration because it is not essential to the argument for the portrayal of Jesus Christ.

⁸⁶ Roger S. Wieck, *Painted Prayers* (New York: George Braziller, Inc. 1997), 4.

Hours supplied this need and became phenomenally popular, outselling all other books, including the Bible. These devotional books played a key role in the cult of the Virgin. The Book of Hours functioned as a devotional guide for daily Scripture readings and multiple prayers to Mary. Originating before the invention of the printing press, these books were in manuscript and some were lavishly illustrated in stunning colors, and depicted biblical scenes and portraits of the owner. These pictures had two functions:

On a practical level, they indicated where the major texts began; they were bookmarks (Books of Hours, manuscript or printed, were originally neither foliated nor paginated). Second, as they marked certain texts, they also embodied them. They provided the themes upon which to meditate...The miniatures or prints depicting in one's book the mysteries of the Incarnation, the sorrows of the Passion, or the comfort of death could stir the same emotions as the images one saw at church.⁸⁷

Women played a key role in the popularity and patronage of the Book of Hours. The male clergy believed that women needed the images in order to help them in their piety.⁸⁸

The increase in piety sought to express itself in other ways. The cult of the saints was manifest in two forms: artistic representation and relics. The cult of relics and the cult of the saints were enthusiastically embraced. For example, commissions for religious works of art increased a hundredfold in Zurich between 1500 and 1518.⁸⁹ Coupled with the belief that donations constituted good works unto salvation, great splendor was achieved. Heightened realism of the images, however, allowed confusion between the image and what it sought to represent. The images could acquire a "life of their own, work miracles or become independent cult objects."⁹⁰ Thus, the image was no longer a sign, "a thing that causes us to think of something beyond the impression the thing makes

⁸⁷ Wieck, *Painted Prayers*, 22.

⁸⁸ *Ibid.*, 19.

⁸⁹ Carlos M. N. Eire, *War Against the Idols* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1986), 13.

⁹⁰ *Ibid.*, 14.

on the senses.”⁹¹ Some Reformers recognized that, for many supplicants, the image had now become an idol because it mistook “the sign for that divinity to which it points.”⁹²

Guillaume Farel recounted his personal experience as a boy, when he went on a pilgrimage to the Shrine of the Holy Cross at Tallard, near his village. The cross reportedly contained fragments of the true cross, a claim made by countless other shrines. The cross was trimmed in metal, which purportedly came from the basin in which Jesus had washed his disciples’ feet. His family bowed before the cross and was told of its amazing power, “Whenever the devil sends hail and thunder, this crucifix moves so violently that one would think it wanted to get loose from the cross to go running after the devil...and all the while it keeps throwing out sparks of fire against the storm. Were it not for this, the whole country would be swept bare.”⁹³ The cult objects were believed to be special sources of divine grace and, when venerated, was also a source of indulgences — granting reduced suffering in Purgatory. This granting or selling of indulgences linked to the cult of relics was a major complaint of the early Reformers and led to the conflict with Luther and Tetzl. Bizarre cult objects abounded — Mary’s milk, Christ’s foreskin, and body parts of various saints. But the most common objects were pieces of the true cross. The people were not particularly troubled by the vast amount of pieces of the cross, for they believed that “God multiplied these objects as He wished, for the benefit of mankind.”⁹⁴

⁹¹ William A. Dyrness, *Reformed Theology and Visual Culture* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2004), 19.

⁹² *Ibid.*

⁹³ Guillaume Farel, *Du Vray Usage de la Croix* (1560), ed. J. G. Fick (Geneva: 1865), 147, quoted in Eire, *War Against the Idols*, 9.

⁹⁴ Eire, *War Against the Idols*, 16.

The externalization of piety focused on images of saints, where the image could become confused with the person it represented, and on relics, which were believed by some to have independent power. The Mass also became an object of veneration and a source of power. Therefore, the Reformers attacked all three, including the Mass, as idolatry.

Opposition to images had been present throughout the Middle Ages. The *Libri Carolini* (c. 790) stated that images were not to be worshiped, but it accepted “the veneration of the cross and the commemorative and decorative use of images of the saints.”⁹⁵ Furthermore, this book, cited by Calvin as authoritative, provided two elements in the Reformed argument. First, the text of Scripture is the source of meaning and therefore the written word must take precedence over any image. The second point was that the “interior” person is given precedence over the “exterior.”⁹⁶ Among Catholic groups, the Cistercians and Franciscans resisted excessive ornamentation and the use of worldly symbols. Bernard of Clairvaux (d. 1152) was not opposed to images altogether. Unlike John of Damascus, who based his support of images on the Incarnation, Bernard focused on the narrative of Christ’s life,

The soul at prayer should have before it a sacred image of the God-man, in his birth or infancy or as he was teaching, or dying, or rising, or ascending. Whatever form this image must bind the soul with the love of virtue and expel carnal vices, eliminate temptations and quiet desires. I think this is the principal reason why the invisible God willed to be seen in the flesh...He wanted to recapture the affections of carnal men who were unable to love in any other way, by first drawing them to the salutary love of his own humanity, and then gradually to raise them to a spiritual love.⁹⁷

⁹⁵ Eire, *War Against the Idols*, 19

⁹⁶ Dyrness, *Reformed Theology*, 23.

⁹⁷ Bernard of Clairvaux, “On the Song of Songs,” Sermon 20.6, in *The Works of Bernard of Clairvaux*, trans. Kilian Walsh (Spencer, Mass.: Cistercian Publications, 1971), 152, quoted in Dyrness, *Reformed Theology*, 32.

John Wycliffe accepted the veneration of the cross and modest portraits of the saints, but opposed the “lavish attention” given to images. John Hus called only for an end to abuses.⁹⁸

The image question in the late medieval period cannot be reviewed without mention of Erasmus. His principal goal was to “restore Christianity to its primitive purity, both in theology and piety.”⁹⁹ Thus, medieval piety, which focused on the external practices of pilgrimages and veneration of saints, relics and images seemed to Erasmus to be a perverse digression from the worship of the early church. In contrast to the Roman Catholic worship of his day, Erasmus proposed a highly transcendental concept of worship: “You can only establish perfect piety when you turn away from visible things, which are for the most part either imperfect or of themselves indifferent, and you seek instead the invisible, which corresponds to the highest part of human nature.”¹⁰⁰ He complained that the ceremonialism was dangerous because it had a “vener of virtue and fooled the believer into thinking he or she might really be religious. The sad truth, he added, was that all these practices were the ‘ruin of all Christendom.’”¹⁰¹ Erasmus targeted pilgrimages because they generated a false sense of holiness, led to superstition and general foolishness, and turned piety into a commercial transaction.¹⁰² When a violent iconoclastic riot broke out in Basel in 1529, Erasmus chided, with his characteristic sarcastic wit, “I am greatly surprised that the images performed no miracle

⁹⁸ Eire, *War Against the Idols*, 22-23.

⁹⁹ *Ibid.*, 28.

¹⁰⁰ *Erasmus von Rotterdam Ausgewählte Schriften*, ed. W. Welzig (8 vols., Darmstadt, 1968-), I, 180, quoted in Eire, *War Against the Idols*, 34.

¹⁰¹ *Ibid.*, 37, and 206.

¹⁰² *Ibid.*, 43.

to save themselves...”¹⁰³ Despite his critique, Erasmus was not uncompromising on the image question. He believed that statues and paintings have a place in church as “a kind of silent poetry” because they may affect the emotional state of man better than words. However, abuses and foolish depictions should not be tolerated. Moreover, he recognized that it was useless to remove images from the church if the “idols of vice remain.”¹⁰⁴ Erasmus had an intellectual influence on the Reformers, but his approach was elitist and limited. So when the images and the Mass were abolished in his hometown of Basel, Erasmus fled, “unable to accept the intolerance he had engendered in spite of himself.”¹⁰⁵

The medieval manner of worship concentrated on the objective things of religion — the observances of feast and fasts and the changing liturgy — and less on religious introspection. This pattern was evident in the cult of the images and would undergo profound changes as the Reformation developed. The break with the past came as a new way of imagining the world, but the break would prove destructive to images. Therefore, the iconoclasm that was to come must be understood in the context of the excesses, abuses, and fraud of the medieval system of piety. Eire notes, “The greater the deception is, the greater the disappointment is bound to be when it is perceived.”¹⁰⁶ Iconoclasm was the response of a people “whose piety had been sincere, but now suddenly realized they had been hoodwinked.” And William Stafford explains, “Iconoclasm is not random destructive behavior; it was a slap in the face of medieval piety. People broke statues not because they hated beauty, but because the objects had been holy to them, a holiness

¹⁰³ *Erasmii Epistolae*, ed. P. S. and H. M. Allen (Oxford, 1906-1958), VIII, 162, quoted in Eire, *War Against the Idols*, 28.

¹⁰⁴ Roland H. Bainton, *Erasmus of Christendo* (New York: Scribner’s, 1969), 260, quoted in Eire, *War Against the Idols*, 50.

¹⁰⁵ *Ibid.*, 53.

¹⁰⁶ *Ibid.*, 26.

which had been discredited, which they came to hate.”¹⁰⁷ However, an important truth must not be overlooked — when the crowds entered the churches to remove the images, they were entering their *own* space of worship, not that of another. For some iconoclasts, these actions were vandalism, but for others, “it was an act of corporate and visible repentance for the mistaken ways they had sought to understand God’s presence.”¹⁰⁸

¹⁰⁷ William Stafford, *Domesticating the Clergy: The Inception of the Reformation in Strassburg 1522-1524* (Missoula, Mont.: Scholars Press, 1976), 2, quoted in Eire, *War Against the Idols*, 26n77.

¹⁰⁸ Dyrness, *Reformed Theology*, 48.

CHAPTER 2

MARTIN LUTHER

Introduction

To understand the development of Luther's theology of images, it is best to review how Luther came to be absent from Wittenberg in early 1522, a void that was quickly filled by Andreas Karlstadt. According to Luther, the course of his life changed in 1505. As he was returning to school, a lightning bolt struck near him. He was terrified and cried out, "St. Anne, help me! I will become a monk."¹⁰⁹ Much to his father's dismay, he left law school and entered the strict Augustinian monastery in Erfurt on 17 July 1505.¹¹⁰ He pursued an academic career at the suggestion of Johann von Staupitz, and joined the faculty at the University of Wittenberg after he completed his studies. There, he began to teach the key reformed doctrine of justification by Christ received by faith alone.

On 31 October 1517, Luther wrote to his archbishop protesting the sale of indulgences and included a copy of his 95 Theses. Johann Tetzel had been selling indulgences which would pardon those who bought them (or their relatives) from all punishment. Tetzel's jingle, "As soon as the coin in the coffer rings, the soul from purgatory springs," was a major source of Luther's complaints.¹¹¹ Luther insisted that only God was able to grant pardons. After he had posted the 95 Theses on the door of the Wittenberg church, the Theses were quickly translated into German and disseminated

¹⁰⁹ Roland Bainton, *Here I Stand* (Nashville: Abingdon Press, 1978), 15.

¹¹⁰ *Ibid.*, 25.

¹¹¹ *Ibid.*, 60.

throughout Germany. The Pope was slow to respond to Luther, but eventually warned him in the bull *Exsurge Domine*¹¹² that he risked excommunication unless he recanted.¹¹³ Luther refused, defiantly burned the papal bull, and was finally excommunicated (along with Karlstadt) on 3 January 1521 in the papal bull *Decet Romanum Pontificem*.¹¹⁴

Luther was ordered to appear before the Diet of Worms on 17 April 1521 and was granted safe passage by the Emperor. Although he appeared at the Diet, Luther refused to recant. He left Worms nine days later. The final version of the Edict of Worms branded him a heretic and ordered his arrest.¹¹⁵

However, after Luther left Worms, Elector Frederick the Wise had arranged for him to be secretly taken into custody by his own masked horsemen. He was carried to Wartburg Castle in Eisenbach to ensure his safety. Luther stayed there for almost a year, during which time he translated the New Testament into German and continued his writings. Thus, while Karlstadt was active in Wittenberg, Luther was hidden in Wartburg.

Most of Luther's views on the visual arts would come in response to Karlstadt's preaching and accusations in Wittenberg during Luther's absence.

Andreas Karlstadt

Andreas Rudolph Bodenstein von Karlstadt was born in Karlstadt, Bavaria and was a contemporary of Luther at Wittenberg. Karlstadt became the chair of the theology department at the University of Wittenberg and then chancellor in 1511. In 1512, it was

¹¹² *Exsurge Domine* is Latin for "Arise, O Lord" — the first words of the bull.

¹¹³ Bainton, *Here I Stand*, 114.

¹¹⁴ *Decet Romanum Pontificem* is Latin for "[It] befits [the] Roman Pontiff" — the first words of the bull.

¹¹⁵ Bainton, *Here I Stand*, 147.

Karlstadt who awarded Martin Luther his doctorate. Like Luther, he was involved in the early reformation controversies.

In Wittenberg in late 1521, early signs of reformation began to occur. Luther left his hideout in Wartburg Castle and secretly visited Wittenberg while disguised as a knight. He was pleased with the reforms but wary of the citizens' "revolutionary temper."¹¹⁶ Frederick had ordered caution and forbade any changes in the mass until all could agree. However, Karlstadt ignored Frederick and celebrated communion on Christmas 1521 by giving both the bread and wine to the populace, and proclaimed that faith alone was needed for salvation.

On 10 January 1522, under the leadership of Gabriel Zwilling, the Augustinian monks in Wittenberg destroyed the images in their own house. A few weeks later, under Karlstadt's leading, the Wittenberg town council issued the first municipal ordinance related to the Reformation on 24 January 1522. Mass would be conducted as Karlstadt had performed on the previous Christmas Eve. Begging and prostitution were forbidden. Care for the poor was begun from a common town fund. And then a new point: in an effort to keep church cleansings under its control,¹¹⁷ the council issued a decree that "both images and altars in the churches ought to be removed in order to avoid the idolatry which such altars and images promote."¹¹⁸ But the city council had proclaimed the decree without the consent of the Elector or the church. Although this action was sanctioned by the local government, the actions of the citizens soon got out of control. Shortly after the decree, with Luther back in hiding in the Wartburg Castle, a mob, again led by Zwilling,

¹¹⁶ Bainton, *Here I Stand*, 159.

¹¹⁷ *Ibid.*, 160.

¹¹⁸ Sergiusz Michalski, *The Reformation and the Visual Art* (London: Routledge, 2001), 10.

entered the city church and stripped the altars, broke images and burned the debris.¹¹⁹

Karlstadt did not participate, but he was accused of being the author of the new iconoclasm.

Indeed, just three days after the city council decree, he had published his treatise *On the Removal of Images*.¹²⁰ His treatise provided a theoretical sanction for iconoclasm, but it did not condone the use of force.¹²¹ Karlstadt's work lacks the clarity and logic of Luther's reply in his *Lenten Sermons*, but three basic arguments are evident in his thesis:

1. To have images in churches is contrary to the commandment, Thou shalt have no other gods before me.
2. To place idols on the altars is even more devilish.
3. Therefore, we should put them away in obedience to the Scripture.¹²²

According to Karlstadt, the use of images in the church was a "part of a religious ambience whose function and impact was to retard the intellectual and spiritual growth of the laity, and — more importantly — to misdirect and corrupt Christian piety at its very center."¹²³ Karlstadt believed that most people had never been trained to distinguish between the religious and the simply aesthetic in art, and therefore, the visual arts had a great chance of leading the laity astray.¹²⁴

Karlstadt opposed the Roman church's main argument for religious art that the images were "Bibles for the poor." This teaching had been propounded by Gregory the Great and incorporated into Roman doctrine which argued that the images

¹¹⁹ Joseph Leo Koerner, *The Reformation of the Image* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2004), 83.

¹²⁰ *Ibid.*, 84.

¹²¹ Michalski, *Reformation and Visual Arts*, 11.

¹²² Andreas Karlstadt, *Von Abtuhung der Bilder*, ed. H. Lietzmann (Bonn, 1911), 4, quoted in Michalski, *Reformation and Visual Arts*, 45.

¹²³ Steve R. Halla, "Martin Luther and the Visual Arts: A Study in Theory and Application," *The Conservative Theological Journal* (December 2000), 269.

¹²⁴ *Ibid.*, 270.

“communicated information to the people.”¹²⁵ However, Karlstadt claimed that the laity could only learn fleshly desires from pictures¹²⁶ or, at best, could only have superficial religious feelings when viewing an image of a saint or a crucifix.¹²⁷ He asserted the images to be useless, as he states in *On the Removal of Images*:

From the image of the crucified Christ you learn only about the suffering of Christ in the flesh, how his head hung down and the like...Since, then, images are deaf and dumb, can neither see nor hear, neither learn nor teach and point to nothing other than the pure and simple flesh which is of no use, it follows conclusively that they are of no use.¹²⁸

The chief pillar of Karlstadt’s complaint against images is that they, in fact, do *not* communicate, “They simply are, and for that reason they should be destroyed.”¹²⁹ Images cannot teach anything of spiritual value.¹³⁰ Moreover, Karlstadt remained convinced that the Roman clergy used the visual arts to keep the people in a state of ignorance.¹³¹ By condemning the veneration and worship of images, he also condemned the cult of the saints, an important doctrine in medieval piety.¹³²

Although Michalski notes that Karlstadt did not advocate the use of force in iconoclasm in his treatise *On the Removal of Images*, his actual beliefs were more complex. He was passionately opposed to images since he viewed them as idols. In his reply to Luther’s sermons of March 1522, Karlstadt rebuked Luther in *Whether One Should Proceed Slowly*,

¹²⁵ Koerner, *Reformation of the Image*, 137.

¹²⁶ Michalski, *Reformation and Visual Arts*, 45.

¹²⁷ Karlstadt was arguing only against the superficiality of religious feelings when viewing images or the crucifix. Zwingli would later argue against crucifixes on the basis that divinity could not be represented.

¹²⁸ *A Reformation Debate: Karlstadt, Emser, and Eck on Scared Images*, trans. Bryan D. Mangrum and Guiseppe Scavizzi, Renaissance and Reformation Texts in Translation, no. 5 (Toronto: Dovehouse Editions, 1991), 33, quoted in Halla, “Luther and the Visual Arts,” 270.

¹²⁹ Koerner, *Reformation of the Image*, 136.

¹³⁰ Eire, *War Against the Idols*, 60.

¹³¹ Halla, “Luther and the Visual Arts,” 270.

¹³² Eire, *War Against the Idols*, 59.

To be specific, I ask whether I should leave idols standing which God commands me to take away until all the weak follow in their removal? I ask further whether I may blaspheme God as long as the others do not cease blaspheming? If you say yes, then the enemies of Christ and God may also rightly say that the murderers may murder, the thieves steal, adulterers commit adultery, and similar rascals engage in all kinds of vices until all rascals become pious....And you [Luther] think one must act slowly and forsake evil gradually!...What should I say? Should we teach Gods commands slowly? Should we wait for the crowd?¹³³

Karlstadt likened Luther's slow approach to a mother who refuses to take away a sharp knife from her young child. Instead, he advocated that true brotherly love will "take away from the foolish their dreadful and offensive things irrespective of the fact that they therefore become angry, howl, and curse..."¹³⁴ Such bold actions served God and the neighbor, "That which God forbids and which makes one sin against him and which destroys the neighbor, one should take away immediately, the sooner the better. For thereby one serves God and does good to the neighbor, even though he grumbles and scolds because of it."¹³⁵ His ultimate method to achieve these ends, however, allowed for violent iconoclasm, "Where Christians rule, there they should consider no government, but rather freely on their own hew down and throw down what is contrary to God, even without preaching."¹³⁶

Karlstadt admitted that his beliefs were motivated in part by his own genuine fear of images. He "was pushed to radicalism not only by his theoretical awareness of the inappropriateness of images but also by his own fear, which was an offshoot of images: 'and I have in myself a harmful fear, which I would fain be rid of, but cannot.'"¹³⁷ Other iconoclasts had similar motivations. Thus, when an image has lost its sacredness, it had to

¹³³ Andreas Karlstadt, *Karlstadt's Battle with Luther: Documents in a Liberal-Radical Debate*, ed. Ronald J. Sider (Philadelphia: Fortress Press, 1978), 53.

¹³⁴ *Ibid.*, 65.

¹³⁵ *Ibid.*, 71.

¹³⁶ *Ibid.*, 70.

¹³⁷ Andreas Karlstadt, *Von Abtuhung der Bilder*, ed. H. Lietzmann (Bonn, 1911), 19, quoted in Michalski, *Reformation and Visual Arts*, 45.

be destroyed to avoid even worse temptations for the Christian.¹³⁸ Michalski writes that this fear of images was “probably more deeply embedded in the people of the time than we can probably imagine.”¹³⁹ He notes that some scholars have suggested that one of the causes of iconoclasm of that time was the disappearance of the “specific conventional barrier of signs between the image and the beholder.”¹⁴⁰ In other words, the new religious art of the saints in Germany was startling life-like. The rapidly developing talent of the artists in northern Europe allowed the depiction of the quite realistic paintings and statues. The art work, which now “looked alive” may have aroused an inner fear in the residents of these areas who were not accustomed to such realistic depiction (in contrast to Italy, where such realism was not new, was long accepted, and where iconoclasm was rare). This fear manifested itself when the populace, now enlightened by the Reformers on the futility of image worship, turned on the former objects of devotion. Statues were especially targeted since, being three-dimensional, they were very realistic. The religious images were now “fallen symbols.” The people, long deceived, became enraged at the artwork and tore it from the churches.¹⁴¹

Karlstadt’s biblical basis for the attacks against idols was based on John 6:63, “The Spirit gives life; the flesh counts for nothing.”¹⁴² Although some of the features of his thinking were influenced by Erasmus, Karlstadt viewed things as evil which Erasmus had considered indifferent.¹⁴³ Karlstadt had a more legalistic interpretation of the Old Testament Law than Erasmus or Luther. Although he agreed that the ceremonial law was

¹³⁸ Michalski, *Reformation and Visual Arts*, 46.

¹³⁹ *Ibid.*, 96.

¹⁴⁰ *Ibid.*

¹⁴¹ *Ibid.*

¹⁴² As noted previously, all biblical quotations in this paper will cite the NIV unless otherwise noted.

¹⁴³ Eire, *War Against the Idols*, 56.

no longer binding on Christians, he had a narrow application of this principle and believed the prohibition of images as described in the Second Commandment was still binding on Christians.¹⁴⁴ In citing many Old Testament passages on the prohibition of images, he had to answer his critics who pointed out that the Mosaic Law had been abrogated by Christ. He declared this viewpoint as heresy, and reminded his critics that Christ did not come to destroy the law but to fulfill. Since the prohibition is in the Decalogue, it is still binding, as are the commands against murder and adultery. He was uncompromising on his position on images saying, “I say to you that God has forbidden images with no less diligence that killing, stealing, adultery and the like.”¹⁴⁵

The reason for Karlstadt’s uncompromising stance was his focus on the hermeneutics of transcendence. He repeatedly declared that images are bound to the flesh and cannot transcend it, relying again on John 6:63. Because of his dualism between flesh and spirit, he made no distinction between images and the prototype it supposedly represented. Karlstadt believed that, in fact, there is no prototype related to the image “since material objects cannot objectify a spiritual reality, and that worship offered to images is therefore offered only to the artistic representation, not the person represented by it.”¹⁴⁶ Christ could simply not be known through the flesh.¹⁴⁷ Karlstadt believed that if a person bowed or genuflected before an image, or brought offerings to the image if they sought healing, then they must be worshipping the image itself. Image veneration must therefore be idolatry.

¹⁴⁴ Eire, *War Against the Idols*, 56.

¹⁴⁵ Andreas Karlstadt, “Von Abthung der Bylder und das Keyn Bedtler unter Christen Seyn Sollen,” in “Kleine Texte für Theologische und Philologische Vorlesungen und Übungen,” ed. Hans Lietzmann, no. 74, Bonn, 1911, 22, quoted in Eire, *War Against the Idols*, 58.

¹⁴⁶ *Ibid.*, 59.

¹⁴⁷ Philip Benedict, *Seeing Beyond the Word*, ed. Paul Corby Finney (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1999), 27.

Amid the sermons denouncing images and the continued iconoclastic actions of Karlstadt, Luther emerged from seclusion and returned to Wittenberg.¹⁴⁸

Martin Luther's Response.

When Luther had begun his attack on the Church, art was only of marginal interest. However, the problem of art and images suddenly became a dramatic and prominent issue after the iconoclastic riots in Wittenberg. His comments on art are primarily limited to sections of the *Lenten Sermons* (1522) and *Against the Heavenly Prophets* (1525). His early thoughts on religious art centered on his opposition to the medieval focus on good works as a means of obtaining salvation, an avoidance of extreme expense for church decorations, and a strong distaste for the disorder caused by Karlstadt and his followers.

Against Karlstadt

Luther returned to Wittenberg on 6 March 1522. Three days later he began a series of eight sermons later known as the *Lenten Sermons*.¹⁴⁹ His response against Karlstadt was immediate. Luther was concerned about the violent tone and actions of the Wittenberg iconoclasts. His primary condemnation was against the disorder caused by the followers of Karlstadt, "I say to you that you have erred...since this was not done properly. You will say this is consistent with the Bible, and I agree with this, but where is order? For this was done in a criminal way, entirely without order, giving offence to

¹⁴⁸ Michalski, *Reformation and Visual Arts*, 12.

¹⁴⁹ These sermons are also known as the *Invocavit Sermons* because the first sermon was given on the first Sunday after Lent, "so called from the introit for the day, Psalm 91:15." Available from <http://www.answers.com/topic/invocavit>.

one's neighbor."¹⁵⁰ Luther believed that "images ought to be abolished when they are worshipped...although it is true and no one can deny that the images are evil because they are abused, nevertheless, we must not on that account reject them, nor condemn anything because it is abused."¹⁵¹ He added that we do not try to remove the sun from the sky because some people are sun-worshippers, or kill all the women because of the risk of adultery, or commit suicide because we are our own greatest enemy:

But there are many people who worship the sun and stars. Therefore we propose to rush in and pull the sun and the stars from the skies. No, we had better let it be. Again, wine and women bring many a man to misery and make a fool of him [Ecclus. 19:2; 31:30]; so we kill all the women and pour out all the wine. Again, gold and silver cause much evil, so we condemn them. Indeed, if we want to drive away our worst enemy, the one who does us the most harm, we shall have to kill ourselves, for we have no greater enemy than our own heart...¹⁵²

Luther also pointed out that if Karlstadt's logic about the Old Testament proscription against images was followed, then Christians must be circumcised as well. But instead of removing the images by force, Luther argued that it would have been more effective to preach against them.¹⁵³

However to speak evangelically of images, I say and declare that no one is obligated to break violently images even of God, but everything is free, and one does not sin if he does not break them with violence. One is obligated, however, to destroy them with the Word of God, that is, not with the law in a Karlstadtian manner, but with the gospel. This means to instruct and enlighten the conscience that it is idolatry to worship them, or to trust in them, since one is to trust alone in Christ. Beyond this let the external matter take their course. God grant that they may be destroyed, become dilapidated, or that they remain. It is all the same and makes no difference, just as when the poison has been removed from a snake.¹⁵⁴

¹⁵⁰ *D. Martin Luthers Werke, Kritische Gesamtausgabe*, vol. 10, Weimar 1883-1980, III, 29, quoted in Michalski, *Reformation and Visual Arts*, 17.

¹⁵¹ Martin Luther, *Luther's Works*, vol. 51, *Sermons I*, ed. and trans. John Doberstein (Philadelphia: Muhlenberg Press, 1959), 85.

¹⁵² *Ibid.*

¹⁵³ Eire, *War Against the Idols*, 68.

¹⁵⁴ Martin Luther, *Luther's Works*, vol. 40, *Church and Ministry II*, ed. Conrad Bergendoff (Philadelphia: Muhlenberg Press, 1958), 91.

But Luther and Karlstadt had much different views on the nature of his “offence in faith.” For Karlstadt, the offence of faith came when there was a conflict with God’s divine law. It offends because it stands in the way of real faith. Karlstadt, much more so than all other reformers, repeatedly stressed obedience to the divine law (even of the Old Testament). For Luther, the nature of the “offence” occurred when something offended the conscience.¹⁵⁵ He used this line of thinking, for example, in arguing for slower iconoclastic change so that the weaker brother may adapt to the new ways of thinking more easily.

As Koerner writes, Luther admitted that “certain cult images inspired idolatry, that effigies of the Virgin and the saints supported the Church’s false promise of intercession, and that, advertised as pious donation, votive gift or indulgenced object, church art supported a false theology that claimed, against the *sola fides*, that salvation came by good works.”¹⁵⁶ Despite these concerns, Luther, in opposition to Karlstadt, argued that the images were not about substance, but about abuse. If images were not abused, they could be properly used in the church.

Luther’s focus on salvation by faith (*sola fide*) led him to adamantly oppose the importance of good works for salvation. As expected, he entirely rejected the medieval idea that donors of religious art were achieving merit in the eyes of God. He believed that most of the art donors were simply trying to buy their way into heaven. For Luther, such attempts at a works-based righteousness were the most important reason why images should be removed and he chastised the earlier iconoclasts for not using this argument in their battle against images,

¹⁵⁵ Michalski, *Reformation and Visual Arts*, 47.

¹⁵⁶ Koerner, *Reformation of the Image*, 28.

On the subject of images, in particular, we saw that they ought to be abolished when they are worshipped, otherwise not, although because of the abuses they give rise to, I wish they were everywhere abolished. This cannot be denied. For whoever places an image in a church imagines he has performed service to God and done a good work, which is downright idolatry. But this, the greatest, foremost, and highest reason of abolishing images, you have passed by, and fastened on the least important reason of all. For I suppose there is nobody, or certainly very few, who do not understand that yonder crucifix is not my God, for my God is in heaven, but this is simply a sign.¹⁵⁷

Thus, Luther did not believe, as did the other Reformers, that the laity was really worshipping the images. Michalski writes that for Luther “what was dangerous was not pure image worship — the belief that some emanation or even part of the sacred is immanent in a work of art (in Luther’s opinion, few if any of the faithful believed in this) — but the misguided desire to gain salvation through endowing images and sculpture.”¹⁵⁸ In his *Treatise on Good Works*, Luther wrote,

This is the reason I have so often spoken against the display, magnificence, and multitude of such works and rejected them. It is as clear as day that these works are not only done in doubt or without the faith we are talking about, but that there is not one in a thousand who does not put his confidence in the works and presume that by having done them he wins God’s favor and lays claim to his grace. They turn the whole thing into a fairground.¹⁵⁹

Tempering of his initial opposition to religious images can be detected in his early career. Luther moved “from an originally critical and even somewhat negative opinion of church decorations to an ultimately positive one.”¹⁶⁰ His early position on religious images showed “a certain skepticism about their ultimate value, and a concern over the morality of spending money on material object while the poor suffer from want.”¹⁶¹ He criticized the material objects of worship as “mere shadows and tokens of reality” and

¹⁵⁷ Luther, *Luther’s Works*, vol. 51, 84.

¹⁵⁸ Michalski, *Reformation and Visual Arts*, 7.

¹⁵⁹ Martin Luther, *Luther’s Works*, vol. 44, *The Christian in Society I*, ed. James Atkinson (Philadelphia: Fortress Press, 1966), 33.

¹⁶⁰ Eire, *War Against the Idols*, 67, footnote 54.

¹⁶¹ *Ibid.*

“childish things” and one of his Ninety-five Theses called the building of churches “most trivial.”¹⁶² He reminded his opponents that “St. Ambrose and Paulinus at one time melted down the chalices and everything that their churches had, and gave it to the poor.”¹⁶³ The issue of social costs was important for Luther on the image question between 1519 and 1522, but it was mentioned only rarely thereafter.¹⁶⁴

Luther’s Views on Visual Arts

Although his initial concerns were about the iconoclastic violence, the lack of respect for authorities, the unnecessary expense of church art, and the wrong-headed medieval devotion to good works, Luther’s concept of a theology of religious art developed further over the next few years. His initial comments may seem to cast Luther in a position of opposing images entirely, but his further thought shows a more supportive opinion.

In his *Letter to the Christians at Strassburg*, Luther had ridiculed Karlstadt that his arguments were lacking in any true merit and that God must have hardened his heart.¹⁶⁵ As Luther worked out his own beliefs and arguments regarding art, he ultimately arrived at four arguments for a positive view:

1. The Old Testament does not prohibit the use of images only the worship of them.
2. The Old Testament regulations do not apply to the Christian community.
3. The construction of images is a natural function of mankind.
4. Images serve as valuable religious reminders.¹⁶⁶

¹⁶² Eire, *War Against the Idols*, 67.

¹⁶³ Martin Luther, *Luther’s Works*, vol. 45, *The Christian in Society II*, ed. Walther I. Brandt (Philadelphia: Muhlenberg Press, 1962), 289.

¹⁶⁴ Michalski, *Reformation and Visual Arts*, 7.

¹⁶⁵ Halla, “Luther and Visual Arts,” 271.

¹⁶⁶ *Ibid.*

Luther's most complete, concise, and unified opinion for the biblical support for images is revealed in *Against the Heavenly Prophets*. In disputing Karlstadt, Luther opposed his interpretation of the first and second commandments, believing that the command is against the worship of an image rather than the creation of an image, "And I say at the outset that according to the law of Moses no other images are forbidden than an images of God which one worships."¹⁶⁷

He denied the applicability of Old Testament law to the Christian and clarified the distinction of natural law,

We don't want to see or hear Moses. How do you like that, my dear rebels? We say further, that all such Mosaic teachers deny the gospel, banish Christ, and annul the whole New Testament. I now speak as a Christian for Christians. For Moses is given to the Jewish people alone, and does not concern us Gentiles and Christians. We have our gospel and New Testament. If they can prove from them that images must be put away, we will gladly follow them. If they, however, through Moses would make us Jews, we will not endure it.

What do you think? What will become of this? It will become evident that these factious spirits understand nothing in the Scriptures, neither Moses nor Christ, and neither seek nor find anything therein but their own dreams. And our basis for this assertion is from St. Paul (1 Tim. 1 [:9]), 'The law is not laid down for the just' (which a Christian is). And Peter (Acts 15 [:10-11]), 'Now therefore why do you make a trial of God by putting a yoke upon the neck of the disciples which neither our fathers nor we have been able to bear? But we believe that we shall be saved through the grace of the Lord Jesus, just as they will.' With this saying (as Paul with his) Peter abrogates for the Christian the whole of Moses with all his laws.

Yes, you say, that is perhaps true with respect to the ceremonial and the judicial law, that is, what Moses teaches about the external order of worship or of government. But the Decalogue, that is, the Ten Commandments, are not abrogated. There is nothing of ceremonial and judicial law in them. I answer: I know very well that this is an old and common distinction, but it is not an intelligent one. For out of the Ten Commandments flow and depend all the other commandments and the whole of Moses.

For it is true, and no one can deny it, that whoever keeps the Law of Moses as a law of Moses, or deems it necessary to keep it, must regard the keeping of all laws as necessary, as St. Paul (Gal. 5 [:3]) concludes and says, 'Every man who receives circumcision — he is bound to keep the whole law.' Therefore, also, whoever destroys images, or observes the Sabbath (that is,

¹⁶⁷ Luther, *Luther's Works*, vol. 40, 85.

whoever teaches that it must be kept), he also must let himself be circumcised and keep the whole Mosaic law.

He continued,

Thus, 'Thou shalt not kill, commit adultery, steal, etc.' are not Mosaic laws only, but also the natural law written in each man's heart, as St. Paul teaches (Rom. 2 [:15]). Also Christ himself (Matt. 7 [:12]) includes all of the law and the prophets in this natural law, 'So whatever you wish that men would do to you, do so to them; for this is the law and the prophets.' Paul does the same thing in Rom. 13[:9], where he sums up all the commandments of Moses in the love which also the natural law teaches in the words, 'Love your neighbor as yourself....'

Where then the Mosaic law and the natural law are one, there the law remains and is not abrogated externally, but only through faith spiritually, which is nothing else than the fulfilling of the law (Rom. 3[:31])...Therefore, Moses' legislation about images and the sabbath, and what else goes beyond the natural law, since it is not supported by the natural law, is free, null, and void...¹⁶⁸

Luther distinguished between images which were used in idolatrous worship and images used for remembrance. The former could be destroyed; the latter could be useful or even praiseworthy:

Nor would I condemn those who have destroyed them, especially those who destroy divine and idolatrous images. But images for memorial and witness, such as crucifixes and images of saints, are to be tolerated. This is shown to be the case even in the Mosaic law. And they are not only to be tolerated, but for the sake of memorial and the witness they are praiseworthy and honorable, as the witness stones of Joshua [Josh. 24:26] and of Samuel (I Sam. 7 [:12]).¹⁶⁹

Besides these stones of testimony, Luther appeals to the story in Joshua 22, when the tribes of Reuben, Gad, and Manasseh erect a large altar after settling east of the Jordan River. All of Israel became alarmed that these tribes had turned away from God. Luther notes,

But see how they excused themselves. The altar remained when they heard that it was not for worship or sacrifice, but to be a witness. If, however, it had been incorrect to make an altar, and God's commandment had been strictly applied to making, they would have reduced the altar to ashes. Otherwise they would not

¹⁶⁸ Martin Luther, *Karlstadt's Battle with Luther: Documents in a Liberal-Radical Debate*, ed. Ronald J. Sider (Philadelphia: Fortress Press, 1978), 100-102.

¹⁶⁹ Luther, *Luther's Works*, vol. 40, 91.

have escaped sin, as they said they would. Now the making of altars is as strictly forbidden as the making of images. If one then can make and set up altars and special stones, so that God's commandment is not trespassed because worship is absent, then my image breakers must also let me keep, wear, and look at a crucifix or a Madonna, yes, even an idol's image, in full accord with the strictest Mosaic law, as long as I do not worship them, but only have them as memorials.¹⁷⁰

Luther also outlined the role visual art could play in the life of the church. He believed that the visual arts could serve as a way men could offer thanks and praise to God. The arts may also serve as an "external means through which God's grace might be made known to the inner man."¹⁷¹ But most importantly, he was particularly drawn to the pedagogical function by which people could better know the truths of Scripture. In *Against the Heavenly Prophets*, he wrote noted that his own translation of the Bible contained pictures and since the iconoclasts read Luther's Bible without complaint, how could they complain about the pictures within it?

I know that they have it and read out of it, as one can easily determine from the words they use. Now there are a great many pictures in those books, both of God, the angels, men and animals, especially in the Revelation of John and in Moses and Joshua. So now we would kindly beg them to permit us to do what they themselves do. Pictures contained in these books we would paint on walls for the sake of remembrance and better understanding, since they do no more harm on walls than in books.¹⁷²

And in his lectures on Galatians, he stated, "For ordinary people are caught more easily by analogies than by difficult and subtle discussions; they would rather look at a well-drawn picture than a well-written book."¹⁷³ He recognized that images can be useful because they can "illustrate a thing so that it can be grasped and retained."¹⁷⁴ Luther noted that man's thinking is figurative, "Whether I want to or not, when I hear the name

¹⁷⁰ Ibid., 87.

¹⁷¹ Halla, "Luther and Visual Arts," 272.

¹⁷² Luther, *Luther's Works*, vol. 40, 99.

¹⁷³ Halla, "Luther and Visual Arts," 273.

¹⁷⁴ Ibid.

of Christ, there appears in my heart the image of a man nailed to a cross, just as my face appears in a mirror of water when I look at it.”¹⁷⁵ Michalski notes that he showed “great intuitiveness” when he grasped the exceptional imagery of John’s Revelation, the Pentateuch and in the book of Joshua. To Luther, words were unquestionably more important than images, but the absence of images was something unnatural.¹⁷⁶

Steinmetz summarizes Luther’s two main points regarding visual images — their proper use and Christian freedom,

While it is clear that the First Commandment prohibits idolatry and the creation of images for use in idolatrous worship, it is not at all clear that the Old Testament prohibits the making of images. Moses, who gave the commandment against idols, also put carvings of cherubim on the ark of the covenant and erected a bronze serpent in the wilderness. Hezekiah broke the bronze serpent, not because Moses had no right to erect it, but because it had been abused as an object of veneration. The ban was not on images as such but on the improper use of images.

Furthermore, iconoclasts like Karlstadt were in danger of sacrificing Christian freedom and of transforming the liberating gospel of Christ into a dismal announcement of inescapable duties. Theologians who insist that churches must abolish images commit as grave an error as theologians who insist that they must be venerated. Images, like meat offered to idols, are nothing in themselves, else Paul would have denounced the altars on Mars Hill [Acts 17:16-23] or defaced the images of Castor and Pollux on the prow of his ship [Acts 28:11]. What is at issue in the First Commandment is whether God alone is honored and believed. The Word alone, and not the smashing of images, can free the human heart from idolatry and liberate it for the veneration of the true God.¹⁷⁷

Finally, in his commentary on Psalm 101:2, Luther writes a statement showing his high view of the visual arts and its place in the Christian faith, “God’s Word is presented so powerfully, lucidly, and clearly in preaching, singing, speaking, writing, and painting

¹⁷⁵ *D. Martin Luthers Werke, Kritische Gesamtausgabe*, vol. 18, (Weimar 1883-1980), 83, quoted in Michalski, *Reformation and Visual Arts*, 27.

¹⁷⁶ Michalski, *Reformation and Visual Arts*, 28.

¹⁷⁷ David C. Steinmetz, “The Reformation and the Ten Commandments,” *Interpretation* 43 no. 3, July 1989, 259.

that they must concede it is the true Word of God.”¹⁷⁸ For Karlstadt, Calvin, and the Swiss reformers, such a claim would be unthinkable.¹⁷⁹

Understanding Luther’s Response

Details from Luther’s life can shed light on how Luther arrived at his conclusions. Unlike Karlstadt, Luther did not reject images outright and had a more nuanced approach. Michalski notes that for Luther,

both ontologically and iconographically, it was less important what a work of art *was* than what it *meant* for the Christian believer (italics mine). There is a clear convergence with the general assumptions of Luther’s Christology. For every believer Christ is, first and foremost, ‘there for me’. Questions about Christ’s essence are of lesser importance than the role of the Saviour in the life of a Christian.¹⁸⁰

Like the other Reformers, Luther favored the verbal over the visual, due to the potential ambiguity of the latter. But his concern regarding art was limited to its use, not its possibilities. In other words, he simply asked whether art could serve the weak in their religious education. If so, and if it was not worshipped, religious art was acceptable.¹⁸¹ For Luther, artworks were “neither evil nor good” and he declared, “we may have them or not, as we please.”¹⁸² Religious art belonged to the realm of *adiaphora* (“entities that are morally indifferent”¹⁸³),

Images, bells, Eucharistic vestments, church ornaments, altar lights, and the like, I regard as things indifferent. Anyone who wishes may omit them. Images or

¹⁷⁸ Martin Luther, *Luther’s Works*, vol. 13, *Selected Psalms II*, ed. Jaroslav Pelikan (St. Louis: Concordia Publishing House, 1956), 168.

¹⁷⁹ Although Karlstadt and Calvin have many important differences, neither could agree that the presentation of God’s Word through painting was appropriate. See the following chapter.

¹⁸⁰ Michalski, *Reformation and Visual Arts*, 36.

¹⁸¹ *Ibid.*, 37.

¹⁸² Luther, *Luther’s Works*, vol. 51, 86, quoted in Eire, *War Against the Idols*, 68.

¹⁸³ Michalski, *Reformation and Visual Arts*, 14.

pictures taken from Scriptures and from good histories, however, I consider very useful yet indifferent and optional. I have no sympathy with the iconoclasts.¹⁸⁴

His distinction was straightforward: he opposed any idolatrous veneration of images, but allowed images (such as altarpieces and statues) that were not objects of worship.¹⁸⁵ Thus, much of Luther's belief on visual art was based on his idea of Christian freedom. This approach was fundamental to his understanding of the image dispute. In direct contrast to Karlstadt, he shifted the discussion of religious art "from the domain of eternal religious truths to the domain of 'freedom'".¹⁸⁶ In a letter to Elector John in 1525, Luther wrote,

Although we also do not attach any importance to images, yet we think that people who have pictures painted for themselves, or who own them, should not be condemned as if they acted contrary to God[']s will]. Christ himself did not oppose the emperor's coin but used it [Matthew 22:9], even though it bore images and still does today.¹⁸⁷

And in his third sermon after *Invocavit* in 1522, Luther observed that images are unnecessary but optional, and the proscription against them wrongly impinged on the Christian's freedom,

But now we must come to the images, and concerning them also it is true that they are unnecessary, and we are free to have them or not, although it would be much better if we did not have them at all. I am not partial to them. A great controversy arose on the subject of images between the Roman emperor and the pope; the emperor held that he had the authority to banish the images, but the pope insisted that they should remain, and both were wrong.¹⁸⁸ Much blood was shed, but the pope emerged as victor and the emperor lost. What was it all about?

¹⁸⁴ Martin Luther, *Luther's Works*, vol. 37, *Word and Sacrament III*, ed. Robert H. Fischer (Philadelphia: Fortress Press, 1961), 371.

¹⁸⁵ Benedict, *Seeing Beyond*, 27.

¹⁸⁶ Michalski, *Reformation and Visual Arts*, 14.

¹⁸⁷ Martin Luther, *Luther's Works*, vol. 49, *Letters II*, trans. and ed. Gottfried G. Krodel (Philadelphia: Fortress Press, 1972), 129.

¹⁸⁸ Luther refers to the Iconoclastic Controversy which began when Emperor Leo III prohibited the veneration of images in 718. His actions were challenged by Pope Gregory II. The dispute was settled in 843.

They wished to make a ‘must’ out of that which is free. This God cannot tolerate.¹⁸⁹

Luther’s Metaphysics.

Metaphysics was integral to the development of the reformers’ thoughts on universals and particulars, on the nature of worship, and on body-spirit dualism. A tendency to stress either the transcendence or the immanence of God also affected their beliefs regarding worship and the Lord’s Supper. And the reformers’ metaphysics subsequently influenced their views on the visual arts. Although metaphysics may first seem abstract, there is no doubt as to its influence on the structure of reality, exegesis of Scripture, and subsequent belief and behavior.¹⁹⁰

The metaphysics of Luther and the other Reformers were influenced by the two strands of medieval Scholasticism. Realism, or the *via antiqua*, was associated with Thomas Aquinas and Duns Scotus. Nominalism, or the *via moderna*, was pioneered by William of Ockham. The difference between these two views are well described by Alister McGrath,

Consider two white stones. Realism [*via antiqua*] affirms that there is a universal concept of ‘whiteness’ which these two stones embody. These particular white stones possess the universal characteristic of ‘whiteness.’ While the white stones exist in time and space the universal of ‘whiteness’ does not. Nominalism [*via moderna*], however, asserts that the universal concept of ‘whiteness’ is unnecessary, and instead argues that we should concentrate on particulars. There are these two white stones — and there is no need to appeal to some ‘universal concept of whiteness.’¹⁹¹

Luther’s University of Wittenberg was committed to Realism until 1508, unlike Karlstadt, who attended the University of Erfurt, and Calvin, who attended the Collège de

¹⁸⁹ Luther, *Luther’s Works*, vol. 51, 81.

¹⁹⁰ Eire, *War Against the Idols*, 7.

¹⁹¹ Alister E. McGrath, *A Life of John Calvin* (Oxford: Blackwell Publishers Ltd, 1995), 41.

Montaigu, both of which were unquestioned supporters of Nominalism (particularly the *schola Augustiniana moderna*).¹⁹² As noted previously, Karlstadt believed that the image was only an image and that it did not and could not represent anything more (consistent with his Nominalist background). Luther denied this extreme definition, likely because of the influence of his Realist viewpoint in which the image could represent a truth beyond the material characteristics of the painting, sculpture or altarpiece.¹⁹³ Thus, a metaphysics strongly influenced by the Realist position could allow religious images, as Luther did, in contrast to Karlstadt. Likewise, a Realist position would support some sort of Presence in the Eucharist, whereas, a Nominalist position would favor a symbolic or spiritual presence only.

Luther's great doctrine of *Sola fide* (Salvation by faith alone) was the central focus of his life. Unlike the other Reformers, he was less concerned about the nature of worship. Karlstadt's strong iconoclasm was an outgrowth of his understanding of the spiritual nature of true worship, based on his interpretation of John 6:63. Contrasting the two Wittenberg reformers, Eire notes that Karlstadt "formulated his program of change based on his transcendentalist interpretation of scriptural commands concerning worship, [but] Luther refused to accept these metaphysical issues as central."¹⁹⁴ In Luther's opinion, Karlstadt was too involved in the externals of worship. And although Luther's early opinions regarding visual images seem similar to Karlstadt's, his later thought clearly departed from an unwavering iconoclasm. Eire notes that Luther charged "Karlstadt with pouncing on 'external things' with great violence as if the essence of

¹⁹² Ibid., 42.

¹⁹³ A similar case can be made in distinguishing Luther's ubiquitous view of the Eucharist and the purely spiritual or symbolic view of the Swiss reformers. Others have noted a parallel between beliefs regarding visual images and views of the Lord's Supper.

¹⁹⁴ Eire, *War Against the Idols*, 66.

Christianity consisted in the destruction of images and the overthrow of the Mass.”¹⁹⁵

Luther insists that Karlstadt’s concern over externals not only detracts from the true purpose of Christianity, but also impinges on the freedom of the Christian as much as the laws of the Pope. In his Letter to the Christians at Strassburg in 1524, Luther wrote that Karlstadt

pounces on outward things with such violence, as though the whole strength of the Christian enterprise consisted in the destruction of images, the overthrow of the sacrament [of the Lord’s Supper] and the hindering of baptism. He would like with such smoke and mist to obscure altogether the sun and light of the gospel and the main articles of Christianity, so that the world might forget everything that we have hitherto taught. Yet he does not come forward to show what in fact is the nature of a true Christian.¹⁹⁶

Luther attacked Karlstadt’s policies as a form of “works-righteousness.”¹⁹⁷ He accused Karlstadt of a denial of *Sola fide*, and revealed that he was not “all that interested in the relationship between the spiritual and the material as a focus of reform.”¹⁹⁸

Luther’s metaphysics opposed the body-spirit dualism which was prominent in beliefs of some of the other reformers. Philip Benedict writes, “Undergirding Reformed belief in the inappropriateness of representing the divine in physical form was the Platonic dualism between matter and spirit, communicated to other leading Reformed Theologians via Erasmus and Lefevre d’Etaples.”¹⁹⁹ Carlos Eire agrees with Benedict and notes that Erasmus exegeted Scripture in a Neo-Platonic fashion, quoting Erasmus, “If you are flesh alone, you will not see God; if you do not see him, then you will not be

¹⁹⁵ Ibid., 69, referring to *Luther’s Works*, vol. 40, 67.

¹⁹⁶ Luther, *Luther’s Works*, vol. 40, 67.

¹⁹⁷ Eire, *War Against the Idols*, 69.

¹⁹⁸ Ibid.

¹⁹⁹ Benedict, *Seeing Beyond*, 28. However, Benedict’s assessment is questionable. The Platonic dualism may be argued for Karlstadt, but it is not found in Luther or Calvin.

saved. Take care, then, to become spirit.”²⁰⁰ As a result, Erasmus adopted a highly transcendental idea of worship, and wrote, “You can only establish perfect piety when you turn away from visible things which are for the most part either imperfect or of themselves indifferent, and you seek instead the invisible, which corresponds to the highest part of human nature.”²⁰¹ The tension between body (or material) and spirit was a fundamental issue in the differing metaphysics of Luther and Karlstadt, who came to differing conclusions. This tension was the most important difference between Luther and Karlstadt in their disagreement over the spiritual and the material in worship. Karlstadt advocated worship without the aid of material objects. Luther countered that God always meets people on their own levels, through outward and material means.²⁰² Luther writes,

Now when God sends forth his holy Gospel, He deals with us in a twofold manner, the first outwardly, then inwardly. Outwardly he deals with us through the oral word of the Gospel and through material signs, that is, baptism and the sacrament of the altar. Inwardly He deals with us through the Holy Spirit, faith, and other gifts. But whatever their measure or order the outward factors should and must precede. The inward experience follows and is effected by the outward. God has determined to give the inward to no one except through the outward.²⁰³

His distinctive view separated Luther from the other Reformers. Their differences were highlighted at the Marburg Colloquy in 1529, when they gathered to discuss Christ’s presence in the elements of the Lord’s Supper. Eire recounts the story, “When Oecolampadius said ‘don’t cling so fast to Christ’s humanity and flesh; raise your thoughts to Christ’s divinity,’ Luther responded: ‘I know God only as he became human, so shall I have him in no other way.’”²⁰⁴ For Luther, Christ was *pro me* (“for me”),

²⁰⁰ Erasmus von Rotterdam *Ausgewählte Schriften*, vol. I, ed. W. Welzig (Darmstadt, 1968-), 138, quoted in Eire, *War Against the Idols*, 34.

²⁰¹ Eire, *War Against the Idols*, 34.

²⁰² *Ibid.*, 72.

²⁰³ Luther, *Luther’s Works*, vol. 40, 146.

²⁰⁴ W. Kohler, *Das Marburger Religionsgespräch 1529: Versuch einer Rekonstruktion* (Leipzig, 1929), 27, quoted in Eire, *War Against the Idols*, 73,

meaning his humanity (corporeal and material) was important in relating to us as humans and was an attempt to “visualize the earthly Christ.”²⁰⁵

The main issue discussed at the Marburg Colloquy was the nature of the presence of Christ at the Lord’s Supper. Luther’s opposition to the other Reformer’s denial of the Real Presence is well known, but it is interesting to reflect that, “as a rule, the opponents of the real Presence of Christ in the sacrament were supporters of religious aniconism.” Michalski notes a “characteristic convergence of iconophobia with a symbolic view of the Eucharist.”²⁰⁶ Because Luther rejected the body-spirit dualism and believed that the spiritual life “could never be totally disembodied,”²⁰⁷ he allowed material objects (including images and altarpieces) in worship.

Closely linked to the body-spirit dualism issue was the controversy over externals and internals in worship. Luther departed from the thoughts of Karlstadt and Zwingli on this subject. For Zwingli, the Ten Commandments provided a clear argument for the abolition of images. Luther, however, differentiated between external idolatry, such as the Roman cult of images, and internal idolatry of the heart. Outward behavior may appear to show worship toward images, but Luther did not believe many truly believed they were offering worship to a statue. Instead, Luther was more concerned about the idolatry of the heart. Karlstadt had argued “out of the eye, out of the heart” as his plan for dealing with the idolatry issue and had rebuked Luther for being too cautious in removing images. However, Luther retorted that Karlstadt had a “factious, violent, and fanatical

²⁰⁵ Michalski, *Reformation and Visual Arts*, 66.

²⁰⁶ *Ibid.*, 169.

²⁰⁷ Eire, *War Against the Idols*, 72.

spirit”²⁰⁸ and reversed the proper order since Karlstadt “pays no attention to matters of the heart [and] has reversed the order by removing them from sight and leaving them in the heart. For he does not preach faith, nor can he preach it...”²⁰⁹ Luther believed Karlstadt had declined into a theology of works, i.e. iconoclasts believed they had gained a special status before God by their activities because “he permits idols to remain in the heart and sets up others alongside them, namely false confidence and pride in works.”²¹⁰ On the other hand, Luther wanted to destroy idolatry with the Word of God, meaning to “instruct and enlighten the conscience that it is idolatry to worship them, or to trust in them, since one is to trust alone in Christ.”²¹¹

Karlstadt believed the primary abuse of the Roman church was the externalization of religion, not, as did Luther, the exaltation of man (shown, for example in the Pope granting indulgences or priests forgiving sins).²¹² For Luther, the form of worship was not as important an issue. As Bainton notes, the idea of body-spirit dualism was alien to him: “He could not separate spirit and flesh because man is a whole. Therefore, art, music, and sacrament are the appropriate expressions of religion.”²¹³

Another point of difference between Luther and Karlstadt was regarding the dichotomy of the transcendence and immanence of God. The spectrum of emphases on the transcendence of God and the immanence of God is quite noticeable between the views of the Roman church, Karlstadt, and Luther. The Roman church stressed the immanence of God and Christ in their focus on the cult of images (including the crucifix),

²⁰⁸ Martin Luther, *Karlstadt's Battle with Luther: Documents in a Liberal-Radical Debate*, ed. Ronald J. Sider (Philadelphia: Fortress Press, 1978), 98.

²⁰⁹ Ibid.

²¹⁰ Luther, *Luther's Works*, vol. 40, 85.

²¹¹ Luther, *Karlstadt's Battle with Luther*, 99.

²¹² Bainton, *Here I Stand*, 199.

²¹³ Ibid.

the cult of relics, the cult of the saints, and the Mass. In contrast, Karlstadt underscored the transcendence of God, pointing to the fact that we must worship God in spirit, focusing on a spiritual (or symbolic) understanding of the Lord's Supper, and opposing images, crucifixes and crosses in the church ("since the flesh profits nothing"). Luther's position was somewhere between these two extremes. He emphasized the immanence of God in the person of Jesus, as our personal Savior, who is "there for me."

His primary emphasis remained his opposition to a works-righteousness and dependence on God in faith alone. For him, material objects were indifferent. He, therefore, adopted a view permitting the use of images in churches, as long as they were not worshipped. Each of these views is intertwined in the body-spirit and external-internal questions discussed above. The Roman church strongly advocated an external form of worship and focused on the immanence of God. Karlstadt was much concerned about the spiritual nature of worship and focused on the transcendence of God. Luther tried to hold a middle ground.

Luther's Personal Use of Art

Consistent with his beliefs, Luther frequently used images. Examples include the woodcut illustrations in Luther's translation of the Bible, the Wittenberg altarpiece, portraits of himself, and his personally designed emblem.

Luther's seal (or the Luther Rose) has become a well-recognized symbol of Lutheranism. Luther personally oversaw the design of the seal, and gave his interpretation in a letter to Lazarus Spengler in 1530:

Grace and peace from the Lord. As you desire to know whether my painted seal, which you sent to me, has hit the mark, I shall answer most amiably and tell you my original thoughts and reason about why my seal is a symbol of my theology. The first should be a black cross in a heart, which retains its natural color, so that I myself would be reminded that faith in the Crucified saves us. ‘For one who believes from the heart will be justified’ (Rom. 10:10). Although it is indeed a black cross, which mortifies and which should also cause pain, it leaves the heart in its natural color. It does not corrupt nature, that is, it does not kill but keeps alive. ‘The just shall live by faith’ (Rom. 1:17) but by faith in the crucified. Such a heart should stand in the middle of a white rose, to show that faith gives joy, comfort, and peace. In other words, it places the believer into a white, joyous rose, for this faith does not give peace and joy like the world gives (John 14:27). That is why the rose should be white and not red, for white is the color of the spirits and the angels (cf. Matthew 28:3; John 20:12). Such a rose should stand in a sky-blue field, symbolizing that such joy in spirit and faith is a beginning of the heavenly future joy, which begins already, but is grasped in hope, not yet revealed. And around this field is a golden ring, symbolizing that such blessedness in Heaven lasts forever and has no end. Such blessedness is exquisite, beyond all joy and goods, just as gold is the most valuable, most precious and best metal. This is my *compendium theologiae* [summary of theology]. I have wanted to show it to you in good friendship, hoping for your appreciation. May Christ, our beloved Lord, be with your spirit until the life hereafter. Amen.²¹⁴

Luther’s seal showed his use of the artistic to express theological truth in symbolic form. It conveyed spiritual truths and reality which were beyond the simply decorative and the simply representational. It is difficult to imagine the other Reformers personally designing a similar seal; their theology would hardly allow it.

Luther’s translation of the Bible into German is legendary. There had been earlier efforts to translate the Bible into German, but they were difficult to read because they used an obsolete German idiom and had been translated from the Latin (rather than the original language). Luther, however, used the original sources in Hebrew and Greek and created a version meant to be understood by the common man and woman. These great literary efforts also led to his use of illustrations. After Karlstadt’s iconoclasm of early

²¹⁴“The Luther Rose,” The Lutheran Church, Missouri Synod, available from <http://www.lcms.org/pages/internal.asp?NavID=2558>

1520, Luther wasted no time in demonstrating his support of images for religious education and learning. In September of that year, he published the *September Testament* containing twenty-one full page woodcuts of the Apocalypse. The next year, his *Old Testament* translation had eleven illustrations. His complete German translation of 1534 contained 123 prints, and some versions were hand-colored. The artist is not known with certainty, but was likely from the workshop of Lucas Cranach. In his 1534 translation, the majority of the woodcuts were found in the Old Testament. The New Testament had only illustrations of the four evangelists, but the book of Revelation had 26 woodcuts, including the famous image depicting the pope as an opulently dressed whore of Babylon with the papal tiara on her head.²¹⁵ Luther always insisted that the illustrations and drawings be simply done, so as not to obscure the content of the text with “superfluous things.”²¹⁶ Consistent with his beliefs that images could properly instruct, he included them in his greatest literary work.

But Luther held strong opinions about some aspects of art. He criticized overly gruesome pictures of the crucified Christ. Luther had seen a particularly gruesome crucifix as a monk in his cloister. It left him feeling hopeless, “I was frightened by it, and lowered my eyes and would rather have seen the Devil.”²¹⁷ Christ’s wounds certainly indicated how he suffered for us, but “if too realistically portrayed, they so immersed us in his agony that they eclipsed what he achieved.”²¹⁸ Luther wrote, ‘I will not object if Christ keeps his wounds or nail-marks after the Resurrection, but only insofar as those do

²¹⁵ Bainton, *Here I Stand*, 260.

²¹⁶ Koerner, *Reformation of the Image*, 42.

²¹⁷ Martin Luther, *Werke. Kritische Gesamtausgabe. Abteilung Briefe* (Weimar, 1883-), XXXVII, 310, quoted in Koerner, *Reformation of the Image*, 179.

²¹⁸ Koerner, *Reformation of the Image*, 179.

not look hideous, as usual, but comforting. It could be that he kept the scars of his Passion in his hands, feet and side. But whether they should be still fresh, open and red, as the painters paint, I let others decide.”²¹⁹ Thus, Luther was not only concerned about the accuracy of the image and the utility for instruction, but also whether the emotional impact of the image was appropriate for a Christian.

The most remarkable piece of religious artwork involving Luther is the Wittenberg altarpiece. The idea of the other reformers approving such a piece is unthinkable.²²⁰ Early in the German Reformation, the altarpieces had been removed from the Lutheran churches, but they later returned. The reason for this return is not clear. It has been suggested that the altarpieces were used to distinguish the Lutheran branch of Protestantism from the radical Reformation. However, Koerner notes a distinctive difference between Roman Catholic and Protestant altarpieces. Pre-Reformation altarpieces “functioned with a ritual that required no participants. They offered the laity something to see in the absence of something to do. In their evangelical form, by contrast, retables [altarpieces consisting of one or more painted panels in relief, in contrast to reredos which had numerous carved figures²²¹] served to guide the lay viewer’s necessary integration into the rite.”²²² Such a goal served to explain the nature of Christ’s sacrifice, the Lord’s Supper (and baptism, if depicted), and the purpose of the written Word in pointing to Christ. Their purpose, then, was explanation, not participation.

²¹⁹ Martin Luther, *Werke. Kritische Gesamtausgabe. Abteilung Briefe*, XLIX, 159, quoted in Koerner, *Reformation of the Image*, 179.

²²⁰ The basis for this claim is examined in the next chapter.

²²¹ Halla, “Luther and Visual Arts,” 279.

²²² Koerner, *Reformation of the Image*, 334.

Luther was a close personal friend to Lucas Cranach, official court painter to Frederick the Wise, Elector of Saxony, and his brother, Duke John.²²³ Through the talent of Cranach, Luther's theology of the visual arts "was majestically transformed from simple words on a page to grand visual expressions, which is best seen in the Wittenberg Altarpiece."²²⁴ The altarpiece was commissioned by the congregation and installed in April 1547, the year after Luther's death. In the Wittenberg church, the altar and its altarpiece held the central position (rather than the pulpit). Although there are similarities between the Wittenberg altarpiece and other Roman altarpieces, some differences are significant. The altarpiece focuses on the image of the Lord's Supper, an emphasis on the sacraments, and the supremacy of the written Word.²²⁵ While commenting on Psalm 111:4, Luther was specific in his directions regarding an altarpiece,

Whoever is inclined to put pictures on the altar ought to have the Lord's Supper of Christ painted, with these two verses written around it in golden letters: 'The gracious and merciful Lord has instituted a remembrance of His wonderful works.' Then they would stand before our eyes for our heart to contemplate them, and even our eyes, in reading, would have to thank and praise God. Since the altar is designated for the administration of the Sacrament, one could not find a better painting for it. Other pictures of God or Christ can be painted somewhere else.²²⁶

It is remarkable to consider Luther's distinctive wording in this comment. He notes that images are optional (consistent with his doctrine of *adiaphora*), that written Scripture is to be quite prominent, and that pictures of God and Christ are permissible. In the central panel, Jesus and the disciples are depicted at the Last Supper (including a paschal lamb and a disciple who looks much like Luther). The sacrament of baptism is shown in the left panel and confession in the right. On the left, Melancthon is shown baptizing an

²²³ Halla, "Luther and Visual Arts," 274.

²²⁴ *Ibid.*, 277.

²²⁵ *Ibid.*, 282.

²²⁶ Luther, *Luther's Works*, Vol. 13, 374.

infant. On the right, the local pastor, Johann Bugenhagen, holds two keys and hears confession. These three sacraments are given prominent emphasis.²²⁷ In the predella below the main part of the altarpiece, Cranach painted a scene of Luther preaching. It shows him with an open copy of the Scriptures and a small congregation of local people. The central image on the predella, between Luther and the congregation, is a life-size crucifix. With one hand on the Bible, Luther points with the other to Jesus hanging on the cross. The lighting in the predella suggests an attempt to reconcile the immanence and transcendence of Christ. On all other figures the lighting originates from the right, in conformity with the natural light in the church. The crucifix, however, is illuminated from the left, and casts an unreal shadow opposite to the source of light for the others. Koerner notes, “The existence of a shadow locates the crucifix in the world, announcing that Christ is present in the everyday activities of this church. The shadow’s ‘projection,’ however, the way it ‘delineates itself,’ points to a heavenly elsewhere.”²²⁸ Thus, Cranach was able to represent Luther’s belief in a middle ground between the immanence and transcendence of Christ. However, the images of Luther and his associates pictured on the altarpiece prompted Koerner to observe, “By a strange logic of development, Lutherans replaced the saints’ icons with effigies of themselves.”²²⁹ As early as 1522, the new Protestant portraits induced the Roman Catholics to charge them with the making of idols.²³⁰

²²⁷ Halla, “Luther and Visual Arts,” 284.

²²⁸ Koerner, *Reformation of the Image*, 198.

²²⁹ *Ibid.*, 388.

²³⁰ *Ibid.*

CHAPTER 3

JOHN CALVIN

Introduction

Prior to Calvin's arrival in Geneva in 1536, his life had already undergone profound changes. John Calvin was born in France and educated at the Collège du Montaigu at the University of Paris. He studied law at Orléans and Bourges, where he learned the analytical methods that would make him one of the greatest biblical commentators of his age. He was taught by Guillaume Budé "the need to be a competent philologist, to approach a foundational text directly, to interpret it within the linguistic and historical parameters of its context, and to apply it to the needs of the present day."²³¹ These abilities would be essential to Calvin as he developed his doctrine, including his beliefs on the visual arts. The details of Calvin's conversion are few. The only reliable passage in his writing was written in 1557, when he describes his "sudden conversion" and break from the medieval church. Prior to his conversion, he described himself as "so strongly devoted to the superstitions of the papacy' that nothing less than an act of God could extricate him from his situation."²³² He was a "'stick in the mud,' unable to wade to freedom...content to wallow in the comforting and familiar quagmire of catholic spirituality, [but] by a sudden conversion to docility, he [God] tamed a mind too stubborn for its years."²³³ Rising evangelical intolerance in France forced Calvin to flee as a religious fugitive. He had planned to travel to Strasbourg but detoured through Geneva

²³¹ McGrath, *John Calvin*, 59.

²³² John Calvin, *Corpus Reformationum: Joannis Calvinii Opera quae supersunt omnia*, ed. W. Baum, E. Cunitz, and E. Ruess (Brunswick: 1863-80), vol. 31, 21-4, quoted in McGrath, *John Calvin*, 70.

²³³ McGrath, *John Calvin*, 70.

because of troop movements in the war between Francis I and the Emperor.²³⁴ He had planned on a brief stop, but stayed in Geneva the remainder of his life except for a few years in Strasbourg.

Geneva before Calvin

Prior to Calvin's arrival in Geneva, the city had experienced great change. In the 1520s, many citizens of Geneva sought freedom from the influence of the duchy of Savoy, wanting to establish links with the Swiss Confederacy. At this early date, the primary reason for the unrest was a desire for political freedom rather than religious matters. However, in the 1530s, Geneva's growing alliance with Berne increased popular sympathy with the evangelical views of that city. This religious element would eventually dominate the political picture. But Geneva's alignment with Berne provoked a military response from Savoy in January 1536. Geneva would probably have been overwhelmed were it not for a military alliance with Berne and financial help from Basel. Geneva prevailed, but Berne now exerted its influence in Genevan affairs: "Berne, having lent Geneva its support at a crucial stage in its history, now demanded its pound of flesh. Geneva was not free to choose its own road to reformation: it must adopt the religious beliefs and practice already associated with Berne itself."²³⁵

Zwingli

The religious beliefs transmitted from Berne to Geneva must be evaluated in the context of the early Swiss Reformation of Zwingli, who "produced the most influential

²³⁴ McGrath, *John Calvin*, 78.

²³⁵ *Ibid.*, 83-85.

iconoclastic theology.”²³⁶ Huldrych Zwingli was a humanist who had been educated in Vienna and Basel. While living in Einsiedeln, he came under the influence of Erasmus and became a disciple. Erasmus favored a transcendentalist focus and promoted

a shift from concrete *visual* images to strictly *verbal* ones; from the sensual to the intellectual. The barrier between the visible and the invisible, according to Erasmus, could be most effectively crossed through the symbolic, representational power of words. In this way, language replaces the plastic arts as the medium of imagination... Erasmus allowed for language to serve as the primary link between the human and the divine. This notion would become the heart and soul of the Reformed Protestant crusade against material objects of worship... (italics his)²³⁷

Zwingli came to share a similar stress on the transcendental. He also rejected the veneration of the saints after reading a poem by Erasmus, *The Complaint of Jesus*.

Zwingli wrote that the poem opened his eyes after reading

many beautiful words [in which] Jesus laments that men did not seek all good in Him in order that He might be a fountain for all good for them, a Saviour, solacer, and treasure of the soul. Here I thought, if that is indeed true, why then should we seek help from any other creature...for our souls, Christ was the only treasure.²³⁸

Furthermore, Zwingli found no evidence in the Bible to support the intercession of the saints. Thus convicted, he began preaching against the cult of the saints after his arrival in Zurich in 1519. However, it was not until 1523 that preaching against images began in earnest.²³⁹ As his thought developed, Zwingli’s two major complaints against the Roman church were that it wrongly directed worship to a material emphasis and “had set itself up as an idol, substituting its own decrees for those of God”²⁴⁰

²³⁶ Eire, *War Against the Idols*, 107.

²³⁷ *Ibid.*, 41.

²³⁸ *Huldreich Zwinglis Sämtliche Werke*, ed. E. Egli, W. Köhler, F. Blanke, et al. (Berlin/Zurich, 1905-), 2.217, quoted in Eire, *War Against the Idols*, 77.

²³⁹ Eire, *War Against the Idols*, 79.

²⁴⁰ *Ibid.*, 54.

In their writings, Zwingli and all Swiss Reformers opposed illegal iconoclasm. But, similar to Luther's experience with Karlstadt, the illegal iconoclastic activities of a few people in Zurich would force Zwingli to formulate his iconoclastic policy.²⁴¹ Despite the Reformers stated policy of opposition to unsanctioned iconoclasm, the truth is somewhat different. Eire charges that Zwingli, Oecolampadius, and Calvin led the people to violence indirectly,

They would rant and rave against the idols, and work up their congregations to a fever pitch while telling them that they had to wait upon the magistracy to see the idols removed only to turn their heads away when iconoclastic rioting occurred — never saying that the people had obeyed a principle that ought to be followed everywhere, but also not saying that the people had committed an act for which they should repent. The *fait accompli* was accepted by the major Reformers with some regret over the methods employed, but it was always viewed as a good thing.²⁴²

Zwingli's most complete work on images is entitled *An Answer to Valentin Compar*, written in 1525. Dyrness writes that Zwingli's theology on images is grounded “on the two sides of a single assertion: only God as he uniquely offers himself in Jesus Christ can be properly the object of trust; only a whole-hearted and unconditional response on the part of the believer can properly appropriate this offer of grace.”²⁴³ Zwingli believed that the cause of man's error is his dependence and trust in created things. Therefore, men develop inner and outer idols because they fail to worship God alone. The inner idols may be money, glory, or another deity.²⁴⁴ The outer idols are created by men because of their penchant for material things. But nothing “is to be added

²⁴¹ Eire, *War Against the Idols*, 81.

²⁴² *Ibid.*, 74.

²⁴³ Dyrness, *Reformed Theology*, 58.

²⁴⁴ Eire, *War Against the Idols*, 84.

to the Word of God, and nothing taken from his Word by rashness of ours.”²⁴⁵ For Zwingli, the cult of the saints and the cult of images directly violated these precepts. Unlike Karlstadt, however, Zwingli based his opposition to images more on the propriety of worship as directed by God than the proscription in the Ten Commandments. His opposition to the cult of the saints was based “less on idolatry pure and simple than on the vain hope of attaining justification thereby,”²⁴⁶ and he completely rejected any notion that the intercession of the saints could replace the mediating role of Jesus.²⁴⁷

But Zwingli also believed that it was fundamentally impossible to represent deity in material form (as with a crucifix) and therefore opposed images of Jesus and God on this basis. Unlike Luther, whose dichotomy was between faith and works, Zwingli’s was between the invisible and visible. He stated that neither crucifixes nor other images of Christ should be placed in churches. He had doubts about this restriction, however, and admitted that the Incarnation could be the greatest obstacle for the opponent of images. He adamantly condemned the crucifix in all circumstances, yet he did allow images of the “humanity” of Christ to be depicted in homes, but not in churches. He also allowed pictures of biblical histories in homes. But in churches, no images of any sort were to be tolerated “with the exception of ‘ornaments,’”²⁴⁸ a term which he never defined. Rather inconsistently, he also excepted the images in stained glass windows.

Zwingli focused on the spiritual aspect of worship saying, in commenting on John 4:24, “Jesus says that God is a Spirit, whence also those who will worship him can or

²⁴⁵ Huldreich Zwingli, “Commentary on True and False Religion” (1525), *Latin Works*, 2.92, quoted in Eire, *War Against the Idols*, 85,

²⁴⁶ Michalski, *Reformation and Visual Arts*, 52, referring to P. Biel, “Personal conviction and pastoral care: Zwingli and the cult of the saints 1522-1530”, *Zwingliana*, 16, no.1, 1985, 445-69.

²⁴⁷ *Ibid.*

²⁴⁸ *Ibid.*, 56.

should do so in no more just manner than by consecrating their mind to him.”²⁴⁹ His beliefs led him to banish all visual images, as well as vocal and instrumental music. As noted by Boonstra, “For Zwingli, the silent Spirit moving imperceptibly within the inward man was not aided by music, incense, ritual or images in any substantial way.”²⁵⁰

Luther and Zwingli came to starkly different conclusions regarding religious art, but their initial goals of reformation were not the same either. A major difference between Luther and Zwingli (and the other Swiss Reformers) was that, for Zwingli, “the Reformation decision was not so much in finding a just God, but rather in turning from idolatry to the true God”²⁵¹ and restructuring worship and society along the way. Images were at best a distraction or at worst idolatrous, incapable of conveying the truth of God. Art can never express the holy because art is material, not spiritual.²⁵² Zwingli’s efforts found great support in Switzerland, and his influence spread to the surrounding cantons and ultimately to Geneva.

Berne was the first Swiss major city to follow the iconoclastic policy of Zwingli. Like Zurich, the Berne city council called for a disputation in 1527 to discuss the goals of the Reformation and the Roman Catholic defense. The Reformers triumphed and the council ordered the removal of all images and altars within eight days. Prior to this order only sporadic iconoclasm had occurred, but the council’s decision caused the Protestants to riot and the images and altar of the cathedral were destroyed by a mob.²⁵³ Four years

²⁴⁹ Zwingli’s quote is recorded in P. Auksi, “Simplicity and Silence: The Influence of Scripture on the Aesthetic Thought of the Major Reformers,” *Journal of Religious History* 10, no. 4 (December 1979): 345 quoted in Harry Boonstra, “Of Images and Image Breakers,” *Calvin Theological Journal* 32, no. 2, N 1997, 426.

²⁵⁰ *Ibid.*, 429.

²⁵¹ Eire, *War Against the Idols*, 85.

²⁵² Dyrness, *Reformed Theology*, 61.

²⁵³ Eire, *War Against the Idols*, 108-111.

before his death, Zwingli preached an emotional sermon at Berne which summarized the Reformed doctrine of iconoclasm,

There you have the altar and idols of the temple!...Now there is no more debating about whether we should have these idols or not. Let us clear out this filth and rubbish! Henceforth, let us devote to other men, the living images of God, all the unimaginable wealth which was once spent on these foolish idols. There are still many weak and quarrelsome people who complain about the removal of the idols, even though it is clearly evident that there is nothing holy about them, and that they break and crack like any other piece of wood or stone. Here lies one without its head! Here another without its arms! If this abuse had done any harm to the saints who are near God, and if they had the power which is ascribed to them, do you think you would have been able to behead and cripple them as you did? ...Now, then, recognize the freedom which Christ has given you, stand fast in it, and as Paul said in Galatians [5:1], 'be not entangled again with the yoke of bondage.'²⁵⁴

Zwingli' sermon reveals several key points in the Reformed doctrine on images. Images are useless and powerless. The money spent on them should be used for social purposes, helping other men. Iconoclasm has brought freedom from the bondage of idolatry and false worship.²⁵⁵ Zwingli seems unmoved about Luther's concern for a slower policy to accommodate the weak.

The next major iconoclastic campaign was in Basel, home of Erasmus and Oecolampadius. Having seen the success of reform in Berne, the Protestants in Basel requested their city council to abolish the Mass and remove the images. However, the council continued its policy of moderation and indecision. After a few minor incidences of image destruction, the populace became increasingly frustrated with the council's refusal to take a stand. Mob violence erupted and every image in the town's cathedral

²⁵⁴ *Huldreich Zwinglis Sämtliche Werke*, ed. E. Egli, W. Köhler, F. Blanke, et al. (Berlin/Zurich, 1905-), 6/1.497-8, quoted in Eire, *War Against the Idols*, 111-112.

²⁵⁵ In contrast, Luther believed images were in the realm of Christian freedom, and men are free to use them or not. For Luther, the risk of iconoclasm was that it may be seen as an attempt to satisfy God through works.

was destroyed in a bonfire. The magistrates were scolded by the mob, “All you have failed to effect in three years of deliberation we have completed within this hour.”²⁵⁶ Basel’s council eventually conceded and the Mass and images were legally abolished. Thus, the Reformation was established in Berne and Basel, the two allies of Geneva in its confrontation with Catholic Savoy. The history of the Reformation in Geneva is the story of the growth of Berne’s influence, and the person instrumental in Geneva’s conversion was Guillaume Farel.

Geneva’s adoption of reformed beliefs was similar to the experience in Berne. Moderation and indecision typified the city council’s response to various Protestant demands. As they continued to stall, Farel, in defiance of a council order, preached at churches where he had previously been forbidden to speak. After preaching to a large crowd at the town’s cathedral, he was called before the magistrates to answer for his illegal acts. Farel’s defense was that the crowd had asked him to speak, so he obliged. The council again delayed any real decision, but soon afterward, a mob of boys interrupted vespers at the cathedral. People outside soon joined the boys and began destroying the images, attacking the altar, and desecrating the communion wafers by feeding them to dogs. The wreckage continued the next day at other churches. As in other cities, the iconoclasts had obviated the power of the magistrates — “the Reformation had physically triumphed in Geneva through a rebellious act.”²⁵⁷

The Zwinglian Reformation, which began in Zurich and spread to Berne and Basel, had arrived in Geneva under the direction of Farel. Guillaume Farel and his family had very personal experiences with images which proved critical in his later beliefs. For

²⁵⁶ *Briefe und Akten zum Leben Oekolampads*, ed. E. Stahelin (Leipzig, 1934), vol. 2, 281, quoted in Eire, *War Against the Idols*, 117.

²⁵⁷ Eire, *War Against the Idols*, 147.

example, as a child, Farel believed in the mystical power of a local crucifix which could control the weather. After his conversion, he rejected all his childhood idolatry and became a vehement iconoclast. He viewed his childhood Catholic worship as evil, sinful, and dangerous. For him, the Roman faith was entirely under satanic influence — a false religion with false worship. He spoke of images as diabolical things. He had been bound to them “in the depths of iniquity, idolatry and perdition.”²⁵⁸ Since the images were the work of the devil, they must be destroyed.²⁵⁹

The city of Geneva finally voted to implement the reforms on 25 May 1536. The citizens voted to reject Catholicism, but there was no obvious system with which to replace it, nor a capable religious leader. Farel feared chaos, but believed he had found the right man to lead them in the new reforms — John Calvin.²⁶⁰ When Calvin arrived in Geneva in the summer of 1536, he came to a town already heavily influenced by Zwinglian thoughts on theology, worship, and the arts. And Farel, who had insisted that Calvin stay in Geneva, had proven to be an ardent iconoclast. Moreover, Geneva had already abolished religious art in 1535, the year before Calvin’s arrival. Although Calvin briefly left Geneva for Strasbourg in 1538, he returned to Geneva three years later and lived there until his death in 1564. His influence would prove considerable.

Calvin’s Beliefs on the Visual Arts.

Despite the similarity of their beliefs on visual arts and the profound effect of Zwingli on the Reformation ideas in Switzerland, Karlstadt, Zwingli, and Calvin actually

²⁵⁸ Abraham Ruchat, *Histoire de la Réformation de la Suisse* (Geneva, 1727-28), 530, quoted in Eire, *War Against the Idols*, 188.

²⁵⁹ Eire, *War Against the Idols*, 189.

²⁶⁰ McGrath, *John Calvin*, 95.

had little direct influence on each other's thoughts concerning religious art. Calvin, in fact, made no references to Karlstadt, Luther, or Zwingli on the question of images.²⁶¹ In general, Calvin "regularly and unconditionally"²⁶² condemned images. He did not advocate illegal iconoclasm, but expected the magistrates to enforce lawful removal.²⁶³

Images: Calvin and the Early Church

Before turning to his interpretation of scripture, Calvin stated the historical support of the early church's opposition to images. As long as doctrine was pure and strong, Calvin claimed the early church rejected images,

First, if the authority of the ancient church moves us in any way, we will recall that for about five hundred years, during which religion was still flourishing, and a purer doctrine thriving, Christian churches were commonly empty of images. Thus, it was when the purity of the ministry had somewhat degenerated that they were first introduced for the adornment of churches.²⁶⁴

He also quoted the Council of Elvira in 305, "It is decreed that there shall be no pictures in churches, that what is revered or adored be not depicted on the walls."²⁶⁵ He pointed to Pope Gregory I as a major source of the error which began when Gregory allowed images as "books of the uneducated."²⁶⁶ He believed that the purer early church had been corrupted by the medieval fascination with images.

²⁶¹ McGrath, *John Calvin*, 60.

²⁶² Dyrness, *Reformed Theology*, 50.

²⁶³ *Ibid.*

²⁶⁴ John Calvin, *Institutes of the Christian Religion*. ed. John T. McNeill (Philadelphia: Westminster Press, 1960), 1.11.13 (p112).

²⁶⁵ *Ibid.*, 1.11.6 (p106).

²⁶⁶ *Ibid.*, 1.11.5 (p105).

Images: Calvin and the Old Testament

In reviewing the Old Testament episodes of visible manifestations of God, Calvin begins by recalling that God manifest himself to the Jews by a voice, not in bodily form (Deuteronomy 4:12). The experiences of Abraham, Isaac, Jacob, Moses, and the prophets were a “peculiar circumstance, and not [to] be taken as a general rule.”²⁶⁷ Furthermore, the purpose of these visions was as a testimony of His invisible glory, “rather to elevate men’s minds to things above than to keep them entangled amongst earthly elements.”²⁶⁸

Unlike Luther, Calvin separated Exodus 30:3-5 into two commandments. His division proved to be very influential in his interpretation because two different facets of the command were emphasized. He wrote,

In the First Commandment, after He had taught who was the true God, He commanded that He alone should be worshipped; now He defines what is His legitimate worship. Now, since these are two distinct things, we conclude that the commandments are also distinct...²⁶⁹

Calvin reasoned,

The sum is, that the worship of God must be spiritual, in order that it may correspond to His nature. For although Moses only speaks of idolatry, yet there is no doubt but that by *synecdoche*, as in all the rest of the Law, he condemns all fictitious services which men in their ingenuity have invented (*italics his*).²⁷⁰

Because God is invisible, Calvin echoed some of Zwingli’s concerns when he commented, “The words simply express that it is wrong for men to seek the presence of God in any visible images, because He cannot be represented to our eyes.”²⁷¹ Furthermore, he expanded his reasons for opposing images because they defile God’s due

²⁶⁷ John Calvin, *Calvin’s Commentaries*, vol. 2, *The Last Four Books Of Moses Arranged in the Form of a Harmony*, trans. Charles William Bingham (Grand Rapids: Baker Books, 2005), 120.

²⁶⁸ *Ibid.*

²⁶⁹ Calvin, *Commentaries*, vol. 2, 106.

²⁷⁰ *Ibid.*, 107.

²⁷¹ *Ibid.*

glory, "...His glory is defiled, and His truth is corrupted by the lie, whenever He is set before our eyes in a visible form."²⁷² In his commentary on Deuteronomy 26:22, Calvin emphasized the sin of *erecting* a statue as an abomination to God and elaborated the reasons for God's displeasure, "In this way, His glory is dishonoured, when He is transfigured into a body, or when anything corporeal is mixed with His spiritual nature."²⁷³ Thus, images must be avoided because they were not compatible with spiritual worship, defiled God's glory, and foolishly attempted to portray the invisible God.

In his analysis of the commandment, Calvin saw that the first part prohibited the erection of any images or likeness which represented God, and the second forbade the worship of any image. Because he did not distinguish between worship, service, and adoration, he also refuted the Roman Catholic acceptance of "a visible image of God, provided it be not adored."²⁷⁴ He accused them of making "a childish endeavour at evasion, when they pay only the honour of *service* to pictures and statues (italics his)."²⁷⁵ Calvin admitted that those who used images typically denied their intent to worship them, and claimed only to pay honor to God through the pictures and statues. However, their claim was a "frivolous excuse" because simply erecting the idol was "really to deny the true God."²⁷⁶ Calvin notes that even pagans did not believe that the deity was included in the "corruptible material, but...they imagined that it was nearer to them."²⁷⁷ Thus, "all idolaters regard their idols as visible signs of an invisible God."²⁷⁸ In this respect, the Roman church was no different than the ancient pagans. Calvin believed that it was

²⁷² Calvin, *Commentaries*, vol. 2, 108.

²⁷³ *Ibid.*, 127.

²⁷⁴ *Ibid.*, 108.

²⁷⁵ *Ibid.*, 109.

²⁷⁶ *Ibid.*

²⁷⁷ *Ibid.*, 116.

²⁷⁸ David C. Steinmetz, "The Reformation and the Ten Commandments," *Interpretation* 43 no. 3, July 1989, 264.

inevitable that men become dependent “on the images they had created and could no longer imagine the presence of God apart from the physical presence in images.”²⁷⁹

Likewise, he accused the Roman church of trying to manipulate God through images, because any attempt to access God through earthly aids was idolatry.

For Calvin, men are not allowed to fashion divinity for themselves, because “God himself is the sole and proper witness of himself.”²⁸⁰ Therefore, men must be limited to worship God only as he directs. Otherwise, “every statue that man erects, or every image he paints to represent God, simply displeases God as something dishonorable to his majesty.”²⁸¹ Rather than supporting possible depictions of deity, Calvin viewed the Old Testament manifestations of God as a clear demonstration of his incomprehensible essence. Thus, the clouds, smoke, and flame in Deuteronomy bridle us from “attempting to penetrate too deeply.”²⁸² Moses is told that he cannot bear the brightness of God.

Although others pointed to the artistic and elaborate furnishings of the tabernacle and temple as an indication that religious art was accepted by God, Calvin addressed the issue of the furnishings by pointing to their relationship in the spiritual nature of true worship. He asked, “But here a question may arise, which introduces many others with it, how the sumptuous splendour both of the Ark, as well as the tabernacle and all its utensils, contributed to the worship of God?”²⁸³ He turned to Stephen’s sermon in Acts 7 for exposition and notes that “the tabernacle, the altar, the table, and the Ark of the Covenant were of no importance except in so far as they referred to the heavenly pattern,

²⁷⁹ Steinmetz, “Reformation and Ten Commandments,” 264.

²⁸⁰ Calvin, *Institutes*, 1.11.1 (p100).

²⁸¹ *Ibid.*, 1.11.1 (p101).

²⁸² *Ibid.*, 1.11.3 (p102).

²⁸³ Calvin, *Commentaries*, vol. 2, 151.

of which they were the shadows and images.”²⁸⁴ Just as the slaughter of an ox was nothing in itself, the ornamentation of the tabernacle served only to point to a spiritual worship. However, Calvin did stress that the inherent majesty in the beautiful decorations caused us to recognize the majesty of God and his law.²⁸⁵

Thus, the angels over the Ark were a symbol of his presence, and their appearance marked the readiness of their obedience, their attention to God’s will, and their harmony in performing God’s commands.²⁸⁶ Calvin omitted the details of the physical appearance of the almond-blossom candlestick, but stressed that it symbolized God’s intent to illumine the pure mind which sought only God and to “disperse all the darkness of error.”²⁸⁷ The finely woven curtain of cherubim functioned as a veil to denote “the obscurity of the shadows of the Law,” so

that the Israelites might know that the time of full revelation had not yet come, but that the spiritual worship of God was as yet enshrouded in a veil [*sic*]; and thus might extend their faith to their promised Messiah, at whose coming the truth would be discovered and laid bare.²⁸⁸

Calvin urged that Christians should learn from the veil that “the manifestation of God in the flesh is a hidden and incomprehensible mystery.”²⁸⁹ For Calvin, all the external ornaments of the tabernacle had, as their primary purpose, a reference to their spiritual object.²⁹⁰

Although Calvin was unwilling to accept the motives of those people who used images in his own day, he was not so implacable toward the Israelites shortly after they crossed into the Promised Land. In his discussion of Joshua 22, Calvin recognized the

²⁸⁴ Calvin, *Commentaries*, vol. 2, 153.

²⁸⁵ *Ibid.*, 155.

²⁸⁶ *Ibid.*

²⁸⁷ *Ibid.*, 162.

²⁸⁸ *Ibid.*, 175.

²⁸⁹ *Ibid.*, 176.

²⁹⁰ *Ibid.*, 165.

legitimacy of the altar built by the tribes of Reuben, Gad and the half tribe of Manasseh. Despite the fact that the Law prohibited two altars (Exodus 20:24), Calvin discerned that the motive of these tribes was important in determining if sin had been committed. He noted that “the motive for erecting the altar was right in itself” for they had only intended “to erect a memorial of common faith and fraternal concord”²⁹¹ (Joshua 22:26-27). Calvin did not oppose the construction of this altar because “it was destined for a different use and purpose.”²⁹² However, when faced with the use of images and statues in his own day, Calvin refused to consider motive as a legitimate factor in accepting or rejecting the image.

Images: Calvin and the New Testament

In his commentary on John 4:24, Calvin linked the concepts of the veiling of God with spiritual worship, “[In the Old Testament] they had the Spirit shadowed forth by many figures, we have it in simplicity. But it has always been an acknowledged point, that God, who is a Spirit, must be worshipped in spirit and in truth.”²⁹³ He echoed similar thoughts when he wrote that the ceremonies were meant to show forth Christ, not to hide him,

Christ also marked this dissimilarity between the old and new people in his own words when he said to the Samaritan woman that the time had come ‘when the true worshipers should worship God in spirit and in truth’ [John 4:23]. Indeed, this had always been done. But the new worshipers differ from the old in that under Moses the spiritual worship of God was figured and, so to speak, enwrapped in many ceremonies; but now these are abolished, he is worshiped more simply.²⁹⁴

²⁹¹ Calvin, *Commentaries*, vol. 6, 253.

²⁹² *Ibid.*, 255.

²⁹³ John Calvin, *The Necessity of Reforming the Church* (1544; reprint, Audubon, N.J.: Old Path Publications, 1994), 9-10, quoted in Boonstra, “Of Images and Image Breakers,” 426.

²⁹⁴ Calvin, *Institutes*, 4.10.14, (p1192).

Likewise, in the New Testament manifestation of the Holy Spirit as a dove at Jesus' baptism, Calvin noted that the dove "vanished at once" emphasizing the invisible nature of the Spirit.²⁹⁵

Calvin avoids the relationship of the Incarnation to images altogether. As Zwingli had warned, the humanity of the Son of God adds a unique difficulty to those who oppose images. Calvin did not discriminate between God the Father and Jesus Christ the God-man in his statements on images, and Christology did not play a significant role in the image question. He rejected any representation of Christ, dubbing the crucifix "the devilish form of Christ."²⁹⁶

In the image question, "Calvin speaks the whole time about the affront to God, while very rarely mentioning images of Christ."²⁹⁷ Michalski quotes Weber,

With Calvin Christ is always examined together with God, they form an objective whole, we can approach Christ through spiritual mediation. On the other hand, in Luther Christ is seen first and foremost from the side of his relation to the individual [*pro me*].²⁹⁸

Calvin emphasized the attributes of God's majesty and power (*solī Deo gloria*) and stressed God's omnipotence, greatness, and "immeasurable distance from us," which underscore God's (and Christ's) transcendence. Michalski writes that for Calvin "the whole Christ was contained in the Resurrection and the return to the Father, since we no longer know the corporeal Jesus and can only grasp him 'spiritually'; Calvin completely

²⁹⁵ Calvin, *Institutes*, 1.11.3 (p102).

²⁹⁶ Michalski, *Reformation and Visual Arts*, 66. Luther said that works are "another form, altogether devilish" in his commentary on Galatians 4:19.

²⁹⁷ *Ibid.*

²⁹⁸ *Ibid.*, 60.

rejected the Lutheran Christ *pro me*, understood as an attempt to visualize the earthy Christ.”²⁹⁹

Images: Calvin and the “Legitimate Use of Art”

Despite his unwavering attack on religious art, Calvin did not condemn all sculpture and paintings. In his catechism of 1542, he asked if the second commandment prohibits us from painting anything or sculpting any likeness. He answered, “No, but it does forbid these two things: that we make images either for representing God, or for worshipping him,” and the reason given is “because there is no resemblance between him who is spirit eternal and incomprehensible, and corporeal, corruptible, and dead figures.”³⁰⁰ In discussing the second commandment, he added, “There is no need of refuting the foolish fancy of some, that all sculptures and pictures are here condemned by Moses.”³⁰¹ For him, the prohibition was against an image which represented God or an image that would cause men to regard it in a religious light. In his exposition of Exodus 34:17, “Do not make cast idols,” Calvin noted that the Hebrew word for idols (מִצַּבֵּי) is sometimes “used in a good sense; whence it follows, that no other statues are here condemned, except those which are erected as representations of God.”³⁰² Thus, artistic representations of men and nature could be painted or sculpted, but Calvin saw limits to these endeavors.

He limited art to “only those things...which the eyes are capable of seeing,” but he warned, “Let not God’s majesty, which is far above the perception of the eyes, be

²⁹⁹ Michalski, *Reformation and Visual Arts*, 66.

³⁰⁰ John Calvin, “Geneva Catechism”, *Theological Treatises*, ed. J. K. S. Reid (London: SCM Press, 1954), 109, quoted in Dyrness, *Reformation Theology and Visual Culture*, 90.

³⁰¹ Calvin, *Commentaries*, vol. 2, 108.

³⁰² *Ibid.*, 117.

debased through unseemly representations.”³⁰³ Since God could not be seen with the eyes, images of God or Jesus could never be allowed. Religious images were therefore impossible, but Calvin permitted depictions of nature (which would be instrumental in the Dutch landscape painters in the seventeenth century). Besides images of nature, he concluded that pictures of historical events may have some use in admonition and teaching.

Calvin could not allow depictions of the invisible world, fanciful myths, speculative events, or immodesty. He severely chastised the Roman church for its licentious depiction of its saints, calling such images “monstrosities,”

The pictures or statues that they dedicate to saints — what are they but examples of the most abandoned lust and obscenity? If anyone wished to model himself after them, he would be fit for the lash. Indeed, brothels show harlots clad more virtuously and modestly than the churches show those objects which they wish to be thought images of virgins. For martyrs they fashion a habit not a whit more decent.³⁰⁴

Although he believed that artistic abilities were gifts of God, he elaborated on the restrictions in the use and expression of these gifts,

And yet I am not gripped by the superstition of thinking absolutely no images permissible. But because sculpture and painting are gifts of God, I seek a pure and legitimate use of each... Therefore it remains that only those things are to be sculptured or painted which the eyes are capable of seeing: let not God’s majesty, which is far above the perception of the eyes, be debased through unseemly representations. Within this class some are histories and events, some are images and forms of bodies without any depicting of past events. The former have some use in teaching or admonition; as for the latter, I do not see what they can afford other than pleasure.³⁰⁵

³⁰³ Calvin, *Institutes*, 1.11.12. (p112).

³⁰⁴ Calvin, *Institutes*, 1.11.7 (p107).

³⁰⁵ Calvin, *Institutes*, 1.11.12. (p112).

Calvin did not reject all forms of visual art, only religious art in churches. He had strong beliefs on the beauty of nature and believed it was the best art. Wonder at nature would then lead to “humility and moderation that best suited the human situation before God,”³⁰⁶ especially His attributes of glory and majesty. Regarding the evidence for God in nature, Calvin commented that the writer of Hebrews “describes the visible world as images of the invisible, the elegant structure of the world serving as a kind of mirror in which we may see God, who is otherwise invisible.”³⁰⁷ Curiously, he never believed that a man-made image could accomplish same thing.

Thus, he allowed a limited role for the artist with limited subjects to depict. Art could be enjoyed within these boundaries, but it was otherwise useless. Calvin showed significant ambivalence in his comments in the arts. Although he recognized the legitimate pleasure that the arts can give, he remained cautious. Dyrness comments, “Whatever Calvin’s good wishes might have been for those gifted in the arts, Calvin gives them no positive encouragement or guidance. As a result, artists and sculptors were mostly out of work in the Geneva of Calvin’s time.”³⁰⁸

Spiritual Worship and the Arts.

Fundamental to Calvin’s beliefs on religious art was his concept of proper worship. His idea of worship was grounded in his principle of divine accommodation where God adjusts himself to the capacities of the human mind and heart,

For who even of slight intelligence does not understand that, as nurses commonly do with infants, God is wont in a measure to ‘lisp’ in speaking to us? Thus such

³⁰⁶ Leon Wencelius, *L’Esthétique de Calvin* (Paris: Société d’Edition “Les Belles Lettres”, n.d. [1937]), 103-11, quoted in Dyrness, *Reformed Theology*, 74.

³⁰⁷ McGrath, *John Calvin*, 255. See Calvin, *Institutes*, 1.5.1, (p52).

³⁰⁸ Dyrness, *Reformation Theology and Visual Culture*, 79.

forms of speaking do not so much express clearly what God is like as accommodate the knowledge of him to our slight capacity. To do this he must descend far beneath his loftiness.³⁰⁹

Revelation therefore becomes an act of divine condescension. Although there is definite evidence of God in his creation, He may be fully known only through Jesus Christ who is revealed in the special revelation of Scripture. And just as Jesus is revealed in Scripture, we must conform our worship to God's directives in Scripture.

Calvin's view on transcendence is crucial to his understanding of worship and, by derivation, religious images. In his reformation of worship, two phrases would characterize his practical instructions. Worship must be *solī Deo gloria* (to God alone be the glory) and *finitum non est capax infiniti* (the finite cannot contain the infinite).³¹⁰ Since God transcended all materiality and was "as different from flesh as fire is from water,"³¹¹ he must not be worshiped by material means.

Calvin and Spiritual Worship

Therefore, the only correct form of worship, according to Calvin, is "spiritual worship." Eire describes Calvin's idea of spiritual worship as focused in two points. First, true worship must be devoid of trust in material objects or humanly devised ceremonies and, secondly, worship must be limited to those instructions commanded by God.³¹²

The superiority of the spiritual over the material is the core of Calvin's teaching. Attempts to mingle the material with the spiritual in worship corrupts God's honor because it diminishes God's glory,

³⁰⁹ Calvin, *Institutes*, 1.13.1, (p121).

³¹⁰ Eire, *War Against the Idols*, 197.

³¹¹ Calvin, *Corpus Reformatorum: Joannis Calvinī Opera*, vol. 47, 90, quoted in Eire, *War Against the Idols*, 197.

³¹² Eire, *War Against the Idols*, 200.

Since this brute stupidity gripped the whole world — to pant after visible figures of God, and thus to form gods of wood, stone, gold, silver, or other dead and corruptible matter — we must cling to this principle: God’s glory is corrupted by an impious falsehood whenever any form is attached to him.³¹³

Part of his biblical argument focused on God’s reminder to Moses that when he heard the voice of God at Horeb, he “heard the sound of words but saw no form” (Deut 4:15). Calvin rejected the opposing argument that the visible signs of God in the Old Testament might allow images of God. For example, the true function of the cherubim on the Ark was to conceal the majesty of God and the clouds of smoke and flame in Exodus “clearly told men of his incomprehensible essence.”³¹⁴ God is improperly worshipped if by any visible symbol.³¹⁵ He accused the Roman Catholics of intermingling the spiritual and the material, through their use of images, relics, and the cult of the saints. Images were idols which robbed God of his due glory (Isaiah 48:11), and visual art had no place in true worship. Thus Calvin rejected images of God on the basis of their diminution of God’s glory, rather than a primary focus on the proscriptions in the Law of God, as Karlstadt had done, or because of the impossibility of representing divinity, as Zwingli noted.

Calvin had distinctive opinions regarding the use of images in the Old Testament.³¹⁶ Zwingli had allowed religious ornament and believed that the cherubs on the Ark of the Covenant were an example of this use. Calvin, however, consistent with his stress on the transcendence of God, viewed the cherubs as protecting the majesty of God like a veil,

³¹³ Calvin, *Institutes*, 1.11.1, (p100).

³¹⁴ *Ibid.*, 1.11.3, (p102).

³¹⁵ Eire, *War Against the Idols*, 201.

³¹⁶ The iconodules had used the presence of images in the Old Testament to give biblical support for religious art (See also chapter 5).

Through this covering of the Ark they stopped the human eye from contemplating God...If the Papists say that there were images of cherubs in the Ark, this really refers to...the necessity of closing our eyes when the need comes to have recourse to God and of not approaching him except through the mediation of his voice.³¹⁷

Calvin's comments are revealing. He believed that God must condescend to communicate with us in our profound limitation. God is inscrutable and his revelation can be known only through his written word, the Bible. He stressed hearing (i.e. hearing the Word of God) as the important means of communication with God, because the ear is superior to the eye in receiving God's communication. His quote on the purpose of the cherubs on the Ark demonstrates the impropriety of attempting to see God with our eyes ("the necessity of closing our eyes") and the correct method of approaching God "through the mediation of his voice." Contrary to the position of the iconodules, Calvin believed the Old Testament passages which use images do not support religious art. Instead those instances are actually a veiling of God's majesty and point to his inscrutable, divine, and transcendent nature.

Calvin's second point regarding proper spiritual worship is that God must be honored only according to his commands in Scripture. Eire notes that Calvin's hermeneutic of transcendence becomes apparent as he assails Catholic worship. Since there was no biblical mandate or instructions using images, pilgrimages, indulgences, or relics, then these are all thoroughly corrupt. They have not been established by God and are therefore evil. God's plan for our worship of him must never be altered,

Here indeed is pure and real religion: faith so joined with an earnest fear of God that this fear also embraces willing reverence, and carries with it such legitimate worship as is prescribed in the law...where there is great ostentation in ceremonies, sincerity of heart is rare indeed.³¹⁸

³¹⁷ Calvin, *Corpus Reformatorum, Calvini Opera*, vol. 26, 156, quoted in Michalski, *Reformation and Visual Arts*, 63.

³¹⁸ Calvin, *Institutes*, 1.2.2, (p.43)

We are commanded to worship God in spirit and truth (John 4:24), so there is no legitimate role for material objects or images. At best, images are extraneous things which distract from true worship. Calvin's spiritual understanding of worship is directly linked to his emphasis of God's transcendence ("God is spirit," also in John 4:24).

Zwingli, Farel and Calvin shared a fervent belief in a highly spiritual nature of worship and demonstrated a striking rejection of the "sacred" material objects in worship. The Mass, holy water, and holy oil were considered superstitious. The use of crosses or crucifixes was rejected because "the only cross to be borne by Christians is one of personal suffering."³¹⁹

Calvin complained that image-making is a misunderstanding of the nature of God, "We are similar to God only in our souls, and no images can represent him. That is why people who try to represent the essence of God are madmen. God is spirit...all attempts to depict him are an impudent affront...to his majesty and glory."³²⁰ He believed that the signs God has chosen to show himself to his people were designed to make them "aware of the imperceptibility of his being."³²¹ Images only belittled and denigrated the glory of God.³²² He believed that men should only depict what the eye is capable of seeing. Since men cannot see God or his glory, it must not be depicted. Any figurative representation of a purely spiritual God is a betrayal of both the character and the commandments of the divinity.

³¹⁹ Eire, *War Against the Idols*, 142.

³²⁰ Calvin, *Corpus Reformatorum, Calvini Opera*, vol. 26, 150-1, quoted in Michalski, *Reformation and Visual Art*, 62.

³²¹ Calvin, *Corpus Reformatourm, Calvini Opera*, vol. 3, 122, quoted in Michalski, *Reformation and Visual Art*, 63.

³²² Michalski, *Reformation and Visual Art*, 64.

Among the reformers, some, like Calvin, focused on the betrayal of God's character through images. Others, like Karlstadt, concentrated on images as betrayal of God's specific commands. Zwingli's point was that divinity was simply impossible to portray. Luther's views were much different than these men for he believed that the "visibility of God experienced through the Passion' and the cross enables the believer to give up attempts to grasp the 'invisible God.'"³²³

Understanding Calvin's Response

The degree of vehemence against images is partially understandable among the Swiss iconoclasts. Multiple reports of spurious or overtly fraudulent relics and statues surfaced during the riots and gave further fuel to iconoclastic efforts. For example, "the brain of St. Peter" in Geneva was found to be nothing more than a pumice stone. The "arm of St. Anthony" was only part of a stag.³²⁴ At the St. Mang cloister, the revered bodies of Saints Wiborad and Rachild proved to be some rags, a skull, a large tooth, and a snail's shell.³²⁵ Other instances are even more astounding. A statue of Mary wept tears of "blood" because someone blew red-tinted water into the statue's head through a pipette. In Lubeck in 1525, it was discovered that a carved Virgin was mounted on a swivel and her head filled with a wet sponge so that she could turn away and weep if gifts proffered were too stingy. In his childhood, Calvin was a witness to foolish worship of idols,

I remember what I saw them do to images in our parish when I was a small boy. As the feast of St. Stephen drew near, they would adorn them all alike with garlands and necklaces, the murderers who stoned him (or 'tyrants,' as they were called in common speech), in the same fashion as the martyr. When the poor women saw the murderers decked out in this way, they mistook them for

³²³ Michalski, *Reformation and Visual Arts*, 62.

³²⁴ Eire, *War Against the Idols*, 151.

³²⁵ *Ibid.*, 113.

Stephen's companions, and presented each with his own candle. Even worse, they did the same with the devil who struggled against St. Michael.³²⁶

Such frauds angered the populace and the Reformers and confirmed the blindness of the people to the message of the gospel, a blindness perpetuated by some within the Roman church. For Calvin, these events showed how men's misconceptions and misinterpretations led to superstition and idolatry.³²⁷

Calvin's Metaphysics

The faculty at the Collège de Montaigu was comprised of strong supporters of Nominalism (particularly the *schola Augustiniana moderna*).³²⁸ There were two schools within Nominalism (or terminism), the *via moderna* (modern way) and the *schola Augustiniana moderna* (modern Augustinian school). Both schools rejected Realism and universals. The "modern way" was optimistic regarding human abilities, the "Augustinian way" was pessimistic. Calvin was influenced by the latter. Just how much influence Nominalism played in Calvin's thinking is controversial. McGrath notes that Calvin's dialectic between God and humanity "probably rests on terminist foundations."³²⁹ He continues,

It is also clear that the central epistemological issue addressed by terminism — namely, the relation between the mental conception of an object, and that object itself — would dominate Calvin's later thought concerning God. How can human conceptions of God be related to God himself? In what way may the term 'God' be correlated with the external reality which it designates?³³⁰

³²⁶ John Calvin, *Corpus Reformatorum: Inventory of Relics*, vol. 6, 452, quoted in Eire, *War Against the Idols*, 317.

³²⁷ Michalski, *Reformation and Visual Arts*, 68.

³²⁸ McGrath, *John Calvin*, 42.

³²⁹ Ibid.

³³⁰ Ibid.

Calvin answered these questions in his discussion of images. Men cannot determine the manner in which they worship or relate to God. He must be worshipped only as he directs. Men are not free to use images or other material means to worship God who demands true spiritual worship.

Another significant influence on John Calvin's thought was the French humanist Jacques Lefèvre d'Étaples (also known by his Latin name Faber Stapulensis, c1450-1536) who was the "common mentor, directly and indirectly"³³¹ of Farel and Calvin. Lefèvre was influenced by Aristotle throughout his life, and his desire to return to the pristine sources of the ancient church and his biblicism led him to adopt an ideology of reform. He focused on three points. First, "the Word of God suffices,"³³² by which he meant that the true worship of God must be in accordance with his scriptural commands. Most of the medieval practices of Church must be therefore rejected. Secondly, Jesus was to be the only focus in Christian living. This point negated the cult of the saints. Finally, Lefèvre emphasized transcendentalism, not as a discreetly articulated part of his thought but more as a "central organizing principle."³³³ Lefèvre's convictions ultimately led him to reject the use of material objects in worship altogether, even the cross.³³⁴ In these areas, the thoughts of Farel and Calvin are strikingly similar to those of Lefèvre. The sequence of thought in these Reformers' ideas is rigorously logical. The stress on transcendentalism led them to focus on the spiritual nature of worship, which led them to reject material objects and other externals in worship. Calvin's reasoning led, as a natural consequence, to his rejection of religious visual art.

³³¹ Eire, *War Against the Idols*, 168.

³³² *Ibid.*, 172.

³³³ *Ibid.*, 173-174.

³³⁴ *Ibid.*, 175.

According to Calvin, worship is the central concern of all Christians and the reason for human existence, but men are perpetual idol factories.³³⁵ Calvin despised the acts of “reverence” performed by people who bowed, genuflected, and prayed before images, statues, and relics. In his mind these men and women were guilty of idolatry, “Therefore, when you prostrate yourself in veneration, representing to yourself in an image either a god or a creature, you are already ensnared in some superstition.”³³⁶ Like Augustine, Calvin condemned their excuses including those who said “that they were worshipping neither the likeness nor the spirit; but that through the physical image they gazed upon the sign of the thing that they ought to worship.”³³⁷ It did not matter to Calvin if the people denied that they were worshipping the images, if they were only “venerating” a godly saint, or if they were actually giving worship to God or Christ symbolized by the image. Calvin condemned these actions and the associated images “regardless of man’s intentions”³³⁸ because man’s actions did not relate to the spiritual reality of the worship demanded by God. People were only allowed to bow or pray to God, never to any symbol or image, regardless of their claimed intent. Calvin “would never permit the act of worship to be considered subjectively, from the worshiper’s point of view.”³³⁹ He understood that the image worshippers, like the pagans, did not truly believe that God resided in the images. He wrote, “And we must not think the heathen so stupid that they did not understand God to be something other than stocks and stones.”³⁴⁰ Like the apostate Jews before them, they are not excused by failing to call the images

³³⁵ Calvin, *Institutes*, 1.11.8, (p108)

³³⁶ *Ibid.*, 1.11.9, (p109)

³³⁷ *Ibid.*, 1.11.9, (p110).

³³⁸ Eire, *War Against the Idols*, 231-233.

³³⁹ *Ibid.*, 256.

³⁴⁰ Calvin, *Institutes*, 1.11.9 (p109).

“our gods.”³⁴¹ Even though they recognized that the God was not the image itself, Calvin rejected their behavior as idolatry because such actions disparaged God. They gave to something else what was due to God alone.

Moreover, Calvin did not allow for the degrees of reverence postulated by Thomas Aquinas. Differing degrees of honor “due to the cross (*latreia*), to representations of the human Jesus (*hyperdulia*), and to the images of the saints (*dulia*)”³⁴² were entirely forbidden. Calvin accused them of attempting to “take refuge in a Greek word.”³⁴³ Only God was due this reverence or worship — it was never to be given to anything or anyone else. The problem was that men could not resist idolatry if images or other religious objects were present; therefore, they must be removed. Calvin could be legitimately charged with conflating image and idol.³⁴⁴

Linked to his criticism of the behavior of those who venerated images was Calvin’s strong rejection of body-spirit dualism. Both body and spirit must participate in offering God the spiritual worship he requires,

...since we owe God a dual honor: which is comprised of the spiritual service of the heart, and of external adoration: likewise there is a contrary kind of dual idolatry. The first is, that which occurs when a man, through a false fantasy conceived in his own spirit, corrupts and perverts the spiritual service of the one God. The other occurs when, for any reason whatsoever, man transfers the honor belonging to the one God to any creature, such as an image.³⁴⁵

For Calvin, “bodily gestures cannot be separated from the honor they automatically effect.”³⁴⁶ Since God created both the material and spiritual natures of men, he demands

³⁴¹ Calvin, *Institutes*, 1.11.10 (p111).

³⁴² Eire, *War Against the Idols*, 20.

³⁴³ Calvin, *Institutes*, 1.11.11 (p111).

³⁴⁴ Dyrness, *Reformed Theology*, 14.

³⁴⁵ John Calvin, *Corpus Reformatorum: Commentary on the Last Four Books of Moses*, vol. 24, 387, quoted in Eire, *War Against the Idols*, 256.

³⁴⁶ Eire, *War Against the Idols*, 257.

that the whole person worship him.³⁴⁷ Unlike Luther, Calvin does not use the physical nature of men (nor the Incarnation) as an argument to support the use of material images in worship.

Although he rejected body-spirit dualism, Calvin's writings reflect an emphasis of God's transcendence over his immanence. Eire comments that with the Reformation, "the religion of immanence was replaced by the religion of transcendence."³⁴⁸ The medieval Roman church emphasized the immanence of God through its Mass and their cults of saints, images, and relics. Thus, "the Catholic stream continued to flow as it had for centuries, suffused with the immanence of the divine."³⁴⁹ However, Calvin and the other Swiss reformers stressed the transcendence of God, pointing to the fact that we must worship God in spirit, focusing on a spiritual (or symbolic) understanding of the Lord's Supper, and opposing images, crucifixes and crosses in the church. In contrast, therefore, the Reformed stream "flowed hard and fast in a different direction, surging with transcendence."³⁵⁰

Calvin also disliked intermediate concepts. He did not apply the concept of *adiaphora* ("things indifferent") to the image question at all. For Calvin, if there was the slightest hint of danger of causing "offense," the concept was no longer indifferent, but wrong. This insistence was carried over to his view of images, which must be abandoned because of known past abuse and the risk of idolatry.³⁵¹ For Luther, on the other hand,

³⁴⁷ Eire, *War Against the Idols*, 258.

³⁴⁸ *Ibid.*, 2.

³⁴⁹ *Ibid.*

³⁵⁰ *Ibid.* These three statements by Eire are somewhat overstated, but serve to illustrate an important difference between the Roman faith and the Reformed.

³⁵¹ Michalski, *Reformation and Visual Arts*, 61.

images were under the realm of Christian freedom. Error occurred only with misuse, but the image itself was neutral.

Calvin did not place the blame of idolatry on the natural world. He saw the created world as good in itself, while he viewed men as seeking idolatry at every opportunity. Thus, “idolatry does not result from any insufficiency in matter itself, due to its contingency and ontological inferiority, but rather from a defect in human beings.”³⁵² Men, not the material world, are to blame for idolatry.

The Shift from Visual to Verbal

One of the obvious differences between sixteenth century Protestant worship and Roman worship was a shift from visual to verbal, from images to the sermon. On this point, Luther and the other Reformers agreed. This shift was largely due to the abuse of image worship in the medieval church, but it became negatively associated with the eye as the organ of sight. Not only was the eye lustful (1 John 2:15-16; Matthew 5:28-29), but it was symbolic of things superficial.³⁵³ The danger inherent with the eye was not a new concern — two centuries earlier, John Wycliffe, in “referring to the image dispute, said what nourishes the sight poisons the soul.”³⁵⁴ In the context of the discovery of fraudulent relics and images, Calvin gave Scripture special significance, particularly as opposed to the dumb idols. His strong favoritism to hearing over visual arts caused Guiseppi Scavizzi to comment,

In Calvin the ear seems to acquire an almost divine connotation, the eye only a human and earthly one, both on the level of philosophical deliberations and

³⁵² Eire, *War Against the Idols*, 207.

³⁵³ Michalski, *Reformation and Visual Arts*, 185.

³⁵⁴ P. Auksi, “Wyclif’s sermon and the plain style,” *Achiv für Reformationsgeschichte*, 66, 1975, 11, quoted in Michalski, *Reformation and Visual Arts*, 185.

ordinary mental associations. In fact for Calvin the ear stands for the soul, and the eye for the senses.³⁵⁵

Certainly, the reformers had personally witnessed gross abuses of things visible and tangible. For them, however, the use of the Bible, preaching, and the sacraments constitute the true church, for these reflected the very words of God. As Koerner notes, “this triumph of the verbal over the visual is a proper reformation of the image.”³⁵⁶ This dramatic change is illustrated in the interior of reformed church buildings. The images were removed and the walls whitewashed. The pulpit replaced the altar. But the shift from visual to verbal went far beyond merely aesthetic considerations. The Protestant culture became a “sermon culture.” Sixteenth century preachers gave sermons that lasted for hours with the congregation exclaiming and weeping in participation. Preachers began to use dramatic techniques to grab attention. The focus on the verbal led to Scripture memorization and learning of hymns became a part of the popular culture.³⁵⁷ Everything pointed to the shift from visual images to language as the means to communicate God’s truth.³⁵⁸ In the reformed mind, “the ear was more to be trusted than the eye.”³⁵⁹

Calvin’s Personal Use of Art

Although Calvin forbade all religious art in churches, he did allow art in homes but limited it to “histories” (historical events as opposed to myth), landscapes, other scenes in nature (e.g. “still-lives”), and portraits.³⁶⁰ It may appear that Calvin did not

³⁵⁵ G. Scavizzi, “La teologia cattolica e le immagini durante il XVI secolo”, *Storia dell’Arte*, 21, 1974, 173, quoted in Michalski, *Reformation and Visual Arts*, 65.

³⁵⁶ Koerner, *Reformation of the Image*, 46.

³⁵⁷ Dyrness, *Reformed Theology*, 122.

³⁵⁸ Eire, *War Against the Idols*, 315.

³⁵⁹ Dyrness, *Reformed Theology*, 121.

³⁶⁰ *Ibid.*, 308.

appreciate beauty, but his caution was limited to the effects that an object may have in distracting men from their adoration of God. He poetically expressed his love of creation,

Has the Lord given to the flowers so great a beauty that meets our eyes, so great sweetness of fragrance that flows upon our nose, and yet will it be unlawful for our eyes to be affected by that beauty, or our sense of smell by the pleasantness of that odor? What? Did he not so distinguish colors as to make some more lovely than others? What? Did he not endow gold and silver, ivory and marble with a loveliness by which they are rendered more precious than other metals or stones? Did he not, in short, render many things praiseworthy to us, apart from their necessary use?³⁶¹

Calvin's portrait was painted in Geneva during his lifetime. This prompted Jérôme Bolsec, one of his particularly vitriolic opponents, to sharply accuse him,

I ask, is it a sign of humility, a rejection of vanity, if one allows one's portrait to be painted? Or if one permits one's portrait to be hung in the public places of Geneva? Or if one allows one's portrait to dangle around the necks of certain fools and women who have made Calvin their God?³⁶²

For Calvin, saints were mere men who, though they may have led godly lives, could not be a channel for grace nor could they intercede for sinners. He had forbidden the portraits of saints because men were prone to make idols of them by bowing, worshipping, and praying before them. Did Calvin not claim that man is a "perpetual factory of idols,"³⁶³ and images would always cause men to commit idolatry? How then could he allow a portrait of himself? Could his portrait not be idolized? Bolsec charged Calvin with vanity and inconsistency. The Reformed opinion allowed portraits (among other subjects, such as nature and historical events) because these were things the eye could see. Portraits had two primary uses. One is commemorative, which "brings the

³⁶¹ Calvin, *Institutes*, 3.10.2, (p721).

³⁶² Jérôme Bolsec, *Histoire de la vie, moeurs, actes, doctrines, constance et mort de Jean Calvin jadis ministre de Genève* (1577), quoted in Mary Winkler, "Calvin's Portrait: Representation, Image, or Icon?" *Seeing Beyond the Word*, ed. Paul Corby Finney (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1999), 244.

³⁶³ Calvin, *Institutes*, 1.11.8 (p108).

absent friend to mind and holds him near in imagination.”³⁶⁴ The other is emulation, a concept closely tied to commemoration, and used to “spur on citizens to emulate the glory of their ancestors.”³⁶⁵ The paradox is partially explained through the observations of Mary Winkler: “On the one hand, the portrait is clearly realistic, and therefore may be acceptable. Moreover, there is surprisingly little debate about the affective or superstitious use of the portrait image. In this context the situation of the portrait is crucial: images in churches are suspect or forbidden — images in libraries are not.”³⁶⁶

³⁶⁴ Winkler, “Calvin’s Portrait,” 247.

³⁶⁵ Ibid.

³⁶⁶ Ibid., 251.

CHAPTER 4
ANALYSIS OF RELEVANT SCRIPTURE

During the Reformation, the primary biblical texts used in the image dispute were Exodus 20:4-6, the interpretation of the second commandment, and John 4:24, the meaning of spiritual worship. An analysis of these texts is therefore necessary to evaluate the Reformers' views and to arrive at conclusions relevant for our time. Before addressing the texts, however, it is important to recognize that the numbering of the commandments has played an important role in the interpretation of the second commandment.

The Numbering of the Ten Commandments.

That there are ten commandments given by God at Sinai is generally accepted without question. The Bible does indeed enumerate "ten" as the total number of commandments in Exodus 34:28 and Deuteronomy 4:13, 10:4.³⁶⁷ However, there have been three primary ways in which the commandments have been numbered.

The Jews divide the Ten Commandments by numbering the Prologue statement (Exodus 20:1-2) as the first and combining the first and second commandments (Exodus 20:3-6) into a single command.³⁶⁸ The complaint against this division is that the prologue does not contain a command, only a statement: "And God spoke all these words: 'I am the LORD your God, who brought you out of Egypt, out of the land of slavery.'" However, in each of the verses mentioned which number the commandments as "ten,"

³⁶⁷ It is surprising that little, if any, discussion of the differing divisions of the Ten Commandments is to be found in most commentaries.

³⁶⁸ Peter Enns, *The NIV Application Commentary, Exodus* (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 2000), 415.

the Hebrew word translated as commandment is literally “word.” Thus, Exodus 34:28 (NAS) reads, “So he [Moses] was there with the LORD forty days and forty nights; he did not eat bread or drink water. And he wrote on the tablets the words of the covenant, the Ten Commandments (literally, ‘Ten Words’).”³⁶⁹ The Jews therefore say the fact that there is no command in their first “word” is not an indication of error, but entirely consistent with the other references to God’s words for Israel.

The Roman Catholics and the Lutherans use a different division. They combine the first and second commandment into a single command, and subdivide the tenth commandment on coveting into two: an injunction not to covet your neighbor’s wife and another not to covet his possessions (Exodus 20:17). The Reformers recognized that if the second commandment is subsumed under the first, then the admonition against images seemed less stringent. Calvin railed against this format,

Those who so divide them as to give three precepts to the First Table and relegate the remaining to the Second, erase from the number the commandment concerning images, or at least hide it under the First. There is no doubt that the Lord gave it a distinct place as a commandment, yet they absurdly tear in two the tenth Commandment about not coveting the possessions of one’s neighbor.³⁷⁰

Thus, Calvin adopted “a way of enumerating the Commandments which was different from the traditional list being followed by the Lutherans.”³⁷¹ In this way, a separate commandment addressed the ban on images and, thus, the prohibition against religious art became very clear.³⁷²

The arrangement advocated by the Roman Church and the Lutherans had been adopted by Peter Lombard in *Sentences* (III. xxxiii. 1. 2) and had been supported by

³⁶⁹ The NAS Bible gives a footnote to indicate that “commandments” is literally “words” in Exodus 34:28, Deuteronomy 4:13; 10:4. The NIV does not make this observation.

³⁷⁰ Calvin, *Institutes*, 2.8.12, (p378).

³⁷¹ Michalski, *Reformation and Visual Arts*, 65.

³⁷² *Ibid.*

Augustine. Calvin's view can be traced to Philo Judaeus and Origen, who described Exodus 20:4 as the "second commandment."³⁷³

The two methods of numbering the commandments among Western Christianity allow for immediate insight into the distinctive views on images. Luther's view that the second commandment was an explanation of the first focuses more on the injunction against idolatry, whereas Calvin's view heightens the distinction between the first and second command and allows him to focus on the manner in which God is to be worshipped. Of course, even if one agrees that the second commandment is a further elaboration of the first, Exodus 20:4-6 remains a command. Certain acts are indeed forbidden by God, and these acts must be well understood.

While it may be difficult, if not fruitless, to attempt to establish a "correct" view on the numbering of the commandments, it is essential to realize that a bias arises with each position, and that bias will influence further interpretation of the command.

The Second Commandment.

The second commandment is found in Exodus 20:4-6, and repeated in Deuteronomy 5:8-10.

You shall not make for yourself an idol in the form of anything in heaven above or on the earth beneath or in the waters below.
 You shall not bow down to them or worship them; for I, the LORD your God, am a jealous God, punishing the children for the sin of the fathers to the third and fourth generation of those who hate me, but showing love to a thousand *generations* of those who love me and keep my commandments. (Exodus 20:4-6)

Except for the Lutherans, Protestants take the first commandment to be Exodus 20:3 and the second to be Exodus 20:4-6. By doing so, a distinction is made in the

³⁷³ Calvin, *Institutes*, p.378, footnote 16.

primary intent of the commands. The first commandment, therefore, centers on worshipping the right God, while the second has to do with worshipping God correctly. Philip Ryken comments, “Whereas the first commandment forbids us to worship false gods, the second commandment forbids us to worship the true God falsely.”³⁷⁴ John Durham agrees that the second commandment is more than an explanation of the first. Otherwise, there seems to be little difference between the two: “The first commandment states definitively that each individual who would enter into the covenant with Yahweh is to have no other gods. Only disobedience to that command would allow the use of images of foreign gods.”³⁷⁵ He also notes that the emphatic “for yourself” in verse 4 is unnecessary if it is only an extension of verse 3. Durham believes the distinction points to a command to worship God in a manner very different from Israel’s neighbors, that is, to worship God only in the manner he directs in his revealed Word.

Their views were anticipated by the Westminster Shorter Catechism (Answer 51): “The second commandment forbiddeth the worshipping of God by images, or by any other way not appointed by his word.”³⁷⁶ Likewise, the Heidelberg Catechism, in answers 96-98, elaborates:

96. Q. What does God require in the second commandment?
 A. That we in no wise make any image of God, nor worship Him in any other way than He has commanded in His Word.
97. Q. May we, then, not make any image at all?
 A. God neither can nor may be visibly represented in any way. As for creatures, though they may be visibly represented, yet God forbids us to make or have any likeness of them in order to worship them or serve God by them.
98. Q. But may not images be tolerated in the churches as books for the laity?
 A. No; for we must not be wiser than God, who will not have His people

³⁷⁴ Philip Graham Ryken, *Exodus*, ed. R. Kent Hughes (Wheaton, Illinois: Crossway Books, 2005), 568.

³⁷⁵ John I. Durham, *Word Biblical Commentary*, vol. 3, *Exodus* (Waco, Texas: Word Books, 1987), 286.

³⁷⁶ *Westminster Confession of Faith* (Glasgow: Free Presbyterian Publications, 1997), 301.

taught by dumb images, but by the living preaching of His Word.³⁷⁷

But Fretheim cautions that there are difficulties with either approach, i.e. viewing Exodus 20:3-6 as a single commandment or as two.

Those who view verse 4 as a separate commandment tend to regard it as a prohibition of images of Yahweh, stressing the ‘for yourself’ (i.e., Israel’s worship), other divine images having been dealt with in verse 3... The repetition of ‘bow down’ and ‘serve’ in verse 5 (‘them’) and 23:24 in particular demonstrates a broader reference to verse 4 than images of Yahweh, as does the reference to Yahweh’s jealousy. Yet those who view verses 4-6 as an elaboration of verse 3 encounter difficulty with its inclusion of images of Yahweh, an apparent move beyond verse 3. This can be overcome if worshipping images of Yahweh is in fact understood to be idolatry... Keeping verses 3-6 as a single multifaceted commandment on idolatry seems to do less violence to the final redactive.³⁷⁸

The second commandment can be divided into four parts: the rule, the reason, the warning, and the promise.³⁷⁹ The rule is straightforward — a command not to make idols. An idol was something of stone, wood, or metal that had been crafted by a tool. It could be carved, chiseled, or engraved, but it was modified by human hands.³⁸⁰ The point was not that God forbade the use of tools, because in his instructions for the design and decoration of the tabernacle, tools were used by the tabernacle craftsmen:

...the LORD said to Moses, ‘See, I have chosen Bezalel son of Uri, the son of Hur, of the tribe of Judah, and I have filled him with the Spirit of God, with skill, ability and knowledge in all kinds of crafts — to make artistic designs for work in gold, silver and bronze, to cut and set stones, to work in wood, and to engage in all kinds of craftsmanship. Moreover, I have appointed Oholiab son of Ahisamach, of the tribe of Dan, to help him. Also I have given skill to all the craftsmen to make everything I have commanded you...’ (Exodus 31:1-6).

³⁷⁷ G. I. Williamson, *The Heidelberg Catechism* (Phillipsburg, New Jersey: P&R Publishing, 1993), 169.

³⁷⁸ Terence E. Fretheim, *Exodus, Interpretation: A Bible Commentary for Teaching and Preaching* (Louisville, Ky: John Knox Press, 1991), 225-226.

³⁷⁹ Ryken, *Exodus*, 568.

³⁸⁰ *Ibid.*, 569.

Although God commanded artwork crafted by tools for his tabernacle, he did not allow any idol in the form of anything in heaven, earth, or sea. Ryken comments,

In other words, the Israelites were not allowed to represent God in the form of anything in all creation. Remember that the Israelites had been living with the Egyptians, who worshipped many gods, nearly all of which they represented in the form of animals. The god Horus had the head of a falcon, the god Anubis had the head of a jackal, and so on....But the God of Israel refused to be represented in the image of any of his creatures.³⁸¹

Since the ten plagues brought by God on Egypt were a direct attack on their gods, such a command would be very appropriate.

The idol in pagan worship is often misunderstood. Pagans knew that the deity whom they worship was not identical to the image before them. They knew that the gods lived in the heavens, and the images only represented the deity. Within this system, the “power of the deity is collected and channeled by means of the images.”³⁸² Idolatry among pagans included the very creatures forbidden in the second commandment. The list includes “creatures of the sky (sun, moon, and stars) or the air (birds), in the earth below (trees or animals), or in the water (fish).”³⁸³ Idols often had exaggerated characteristics such as multiple breasts or large phalluses on fertility gods. As Douma notes, these details were never meant to be photographic, as if the deity actually looked that way, but represented its great power.³⁸⁴ Ultimately, in the pagan culture, the image became “indispensable for regulating concourse between the gods and their worshippers.”³⁸⁵

³⁸¹ Ryken, *Exodus*, 569.

³⁸² J. Douma, *The Ten Commandments*, trans. Nelson D. Kloosterman (Phillipsburg, New Jersey: P&R Publishing, 1992), 38.

³⁸³ *Ibid.*, 39.

³⁸⁴ *Ibid.*

³⁸⁵ *Ibid.*

Any attempt to capture the one true God in an image shows a misunderstanding of his freedom, majesty, and covenant. As Douma explains, God is completely free of men's manipulation. Therefore, idols cannot be used as a means of controlling God. Also, God's majesty is such that he cannot be seen by men, thus, pictorial depictions are impossible and demeaning (Zwingli's and Calvin's point, respectively). Lastly, God's covenant does not need to be established by the use of physical images or idols — it has already been established by God himself. God is jealous about his covenant. He promises not only to punish those who disregard it but to bless those who honor it. In both cases, he “vindicates himself as the God of the covenant.”³⁸⁶

But, Peter Enns asks, does the idol forbidden in the second commandment refer to one of the gods spoken of in the first commandment, or does it include any sort of representation of Yahweh himself? He concludes that it certainly includes the former, but believes the command actually has “a two-fold thrust: Israel is not to do as other peoples do by worshipping the idols of *their gods*, nor are they to do as other nations do by worshipping their *own* God that way (italics his).”³⁸⁷ Thus, both are forbidden. When Israel was preparing to invade the Promised Land, God made his position clear,

When the LORD your God cuts off before you the nations which you are going in to dispossess, and you dispossess them and dwell in their land, beware that you are not ensnared to follow them, after they are destroyed before you, and that you do not inquire after their gods, saying, ‘How do these nations serve their gods, that I also may do likewise?’ You shall not behave thus toward the LORD your God, for every abominable act which the LORD hates they have done for their gods; for they even burn their sons and daughters in the fire to their gods. Whatever I command you, you shall be careful to do; you shall not add to nor take away from it. (Deuteronomy 12:29-32)

³⁸⁶ Douma, *Ten Commandments*, 40-43.

³⁸⁷ Enns, *Exodus*, 415.

The reason for the prohibition against images has sparked great debate. Fretheim boldly asks, “But why were images of *Yahweh* forbidden? Wherein does the idolatry lie?” (italics his). He answers this probing question by first pointing to the conventional answer,

The usual answer is that this compromises *Yahweh*’s transcendence. *Yahweh* is above and beyond everything in all creation. But it seems more likely that this prohibition arises more out of a concern to protect God’s *relatedness* than transcendence...Unlike plastic images, which are static and immobile, deaf and dumb, unfeeling and unthinking, and fix God at a point in time, Israel’s God is one who can speak and feel and act in both nature and history (and in this sense is free). This is, of course, a problem with other gods and images, quite apart from what their adherents or detractors might believe about them. Hence other gods (with whatever reality or nonreality they were thought to have) and images of *Yahweh* are exactly parallel in these respects...To worship images is to deny some basic things about God’s very nature as well as the divine *relationship* to the world (italics mine).³⁸⁸

The commandment states that God forbids idolatry because of his holy jealousy, “You shall not make for yourself an idol in the form of anything in heaven above or on the earth beneath or in the waters below. You shall not bow down to them or worship them; for I, the LORD your God, am a jealous God (Exodus 20:4-5).” Durham notes that the word “jealousy” is used to describe a justified jealousy of God. The adjective is used twice, the noun twenty-four times, and the verb six times in reference to his jealousy “always in context where the promised loyalty of *Yahweh*’s people is in question.”³⁸⁹ God’s jealousy is a part of his holiness and obedience of his people is expected. Ryken focuses on the positive reason for this commandment; i.e. it is God’s zeal — “the burning passion of his love”³⁹⁰ — that is the basis for his ban on idols. To clarify a common misconception, Ryken notes that the usual idea that jealousy is identical to envy is

³⁸⁸ Fretheim, *Exodus*, 226.

³⁸⁹ Durham, *Exodus*, 287.

³⁹⁰ Ryken, *Exodus*, 569.

mistaken. Envy is the desire to have something that does not belong to you, but holy jealousy guards one's rightful possession. God's jealousy is one of his divine perfections whereby he protects the honor of his love. In his love for His people, God does not want to have them turn their love to another.³⁹¹ W. H. Gispen agrees that the reason for the prohibition against images of God is his jealousy, but he corrects some of the reformers' errors, "The reason is not that God is a *Spirit* (cf. John 4:24) and thus cannot be *represented* by any images, but rather that He is a *jealous* God..."(italics mine).³⁹²

There are several prohibitions in the commandment against idolatry. Certainly, the worship of idols which are made to represent other gods is forbidden, as is the representation and worship of the true God as a created thing. The actual intent of pagan idols was to allow control of their gods, rather than the belief that the deity actually resided in the idol. In other words, the idol gave the worshippers "the kind of spiritual contact that would enable them to control their gods."³⁹³ Calvin believed that the Roman Catholics of the sixteenth century were guilty of these sins. He claimed that bowing, genuflecting, or praying before an image amounted to idolatry, since those actions were to be reserved for God alone.³⁹⁴ He did not recognize a distinction between worship, devotion, and adoration. But Boonstra questions Calvin's strict conclusions, "No doubt the commandments speak of serving no other gods, but the Old Testament injunctions against Baal worship cannot be simply lifted and applied against the display of the cross or the statue of St. Joseph. The bowing down before graven images is not the same as

³⁹¹ Ryken, *Exodus*, 570.

³⁹² W. H. Gispen, *Exodus*, trans. Ed van der Maas, *Bible Student's Commentary*, (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 1982), 191.

³⁹³ Ryken, *Exodus*, 575.

³⁹⁴ Eire, *War Against the Idols*, 215.

lighting a candle in a Christian sanctuary.”³⁹⁵ Most Christians of that age, and any age, would agree that they must worship God “as he is, not as they envision him or would like him to be.”³⁹⁶ But does a visual representation of any person of the Godhead violate this position?

J. I. Packer concludes that, for Christians, the commandment means “that we are not to make use of visual or pictorial representation of the triune God, or of any person of the Trinity, for the purpose of Christian worship.”³⁹⁷ His statement crystallizes the three primary questions regarding the interpretation of the second commandment for visual art. Are painting and sculpture of images both forbidden? Is the prohibition only against the *worship* of the images, or does it include the *use* of images in worship (even if they are meant to serve as “reminders”)? Are representations of all persons of the Godhead forbidden? The answers to these questions are not fully revealed in the study of the second commandment.³⁹⁸

Other Old Testament Texts

Leviticus 26:1 provides further clarity to the commands of Exodus, “Do not make idols or set up an image or a sacred stone for yourselves, and do not place a carved stone

³⁹⁵ Boonstra, “Images and Image Breakers,” 431.

³⁹⁶ Durham, *Exodus*, 286.

³⁹⁷ J. I. Packer, *Knowing God* (Downers Grove, Illinois: Intervarsity, 1973), 44.

³⁹⁸ Koerner, *Reformation of the Image*, 165. Joseph Koerner notes that another commandment was sometimes used in later Reformed thought in opposing images, “Calvinists sometimes charged that church pictures broke not just the second commandment but also the eighth [*sic*, the ninth by Calvin’s enumeration], for in showing how Christ looked, artists falsely witnessed about what they could not know.” Because Scripture gives no physical description of the appearance of Jesus, any attempt to depict him would be inaccurate, and, therefore, false testimony. However, there was no condemnation of the depiction of other persons of history, especially in antiquity, for whom no physical descriptions were available. Koerner’s book focuses on Luther and Cranach, and he uses the Lutheran method of numbering the commandments.

in your land to bow down before it. I am the LORD your God.” The emphasis is not on the construction of various images but rather on the purpose for which the image is made. Prohibitions in the second commandment did not exclude artwork. A distinction seems clear, as Douma notes, “what is being forbidden here are cultic images and not every image that people might carve from wood or forge from metal or sculpt from clay.”³⁹⁹ He notes that the memorial pillar erected by Jacob on Rachel’s grave (Genesis 35:20), the monument set up by Samuel after the victory over the Philistines (1 Samuel 7:12), the memorial stone ratifying the covenant between Jacob and Laban (Genesis 31:45), and the stones used to represent the twelve tribes at Horeb (Exodus 24:4) all use the same Hebrew word *maccēbâ* (מַצֵּבָה). This word is also used for all the idolatrous “sacred stones” worshipped by Israel and Judah (2 Kings 17:10; 2 Chronicles 14:3). Thus, the “sacred stones” could be used as a proper memorial or as a despicable idol. Douma forcefully concludes, “Images were not uniformly prohibited; it came down to the purpose behind their use.”⁴⁰⁰

When a plague of serpents attacked the Israelites in the wilderness, Moses, at the command of God, made a bronze serpent. The people were instructed to look at the elevated serpent in order to be healed from the fatal snakebites (Numbers 21:6-9). It was not paraded about, bowed to, prayed to, or worshipped. Many years later, however, after the Israelites had been using the bronze serpent in idolatry, Hezekiah destroyed it.⁴⁰¹ “He broke into pieces the bronze snake Moses had made, for up to that time the Israelites had been burning incense to it (2 Kings 18:4).” Yet the bronze serpent was not destroyed until

³⁹⁹ Douma, *Ten Commandments*, 54.

⁴⁰⁰ *Ibid.*

⁴⁰¹ *Ibid.*, 49.

it had become an idol. It was not the object itself which was evil, but the people's response to it. In the wilderness, their response was obedient, but years later, their response had degenerated into idolatry.

Luther and Calvin held different views on the significance of the bronze serpent. Michalski writes, "While Luther emphasized that only the deplorable fact of 'cultic abuse' caused and justified the removal of the brazen serpent, Calvin on the other hand stated that this episode had to end that way owing to mankind's innate tendency to anthropomorphize and visualize religion, and that this was the logical fate even of forms instituted by God."⁴⁰² Calvin's view is consistent with his opinion that men invariably descend into idolatry if given a visual image but is discordant with Scripture which does not give any indication of sin committed until the time of Hezekiah.

A similar point is made in 1 Samuel 4 after Israel suffered a heavy defeat by the Philistines. They brought the Ark of the Covenant into the camp, believing that, since God was enthroned there, victory was assured. Although the people were overjoyed at its arrival, and the Philistines were initially terrified, Israel suffered a second defeat. The Ark was captured. The Israelites had tried to manipulate and control God via the Ark, thinking they could get God to do their bidding. However, God cannot and will not be controlled by men. Furthermore, this account demonstrates that the Ark had no power in itself. Without God, it was no more than "a wooden box."⁴⁰³ No object, even one made of gold and directly commissioned by God, can be used to worship God without the proper attitude in the heart of his people.

⁴⁰² Michalski, *Reformation and Visual Arts*, 67.

⁴⁰³ Douma, *Ten Commandments*, 40.

Like the expanded command in Leviticus 26, the example of the bronze serpent and the misuse of the Ark also point to the improper use of objects rather than a uniform prohibition. Their legitimate presence is dependent on their use. If they are worshipped, they are not permitted. If they are used to represent God, they are forbidden. But there is no restriction on their use for beauty or in liturgical worship. Thus, the prohibition is against the worship of the image, but proper use of images in worship as liturgical aids or reminders is permissible.

Art in the Tabernacle and Temple

A position of adamant opposition to images is difficult to hold when, at God's command, the tabernacle and temple were filled with visual, liturgical art — woven, bas relief, and sculpted.

Despite the wording of the second commandment that “You shall not make for yourself an idol in the form of anything in heaven above or on the earth beneath or in the waters below,” images from heaven and earth were used to decorate the tabernacle structure and furnishings. Cherubim were fashioned from gold and placed over the ark (Exodus 25:18-22). The candlestick was decorated with gold almond flowers, buds, and blossoms (Exodus 25:31-36). The curtain separating the Holy Place from the Most Holy Place was made of blue, purple, and scarlet yarn with cherubim woven into it (Exodus 26:31). The priest's robe was fringed with blue,⁴⁰⁴ purple, and scarlet pomegranates of yarn, alternating with gold bells (Exodus 28:33-34). Each of these elements was made at the specific command of God, “Make this tabernacle and all its furnishings exactly like

⁴⁰⁴Francis A. Schaeffer, *Art and the Bible* (Downers Grove, Illinois: Intervarsity Press, 1973), 14. Schaeffer makes an interesting case for non-representational Christian art in the use of blue pomegranates. Since this color does not occur naturally, it can be extended to allow for abstract and non-realistic art.

the pattern I will show you” (Exodus 25:9). As Francis Schaeffer wrote, “It is important to note that on Mount Sinai God *simultaneously* gave the Ten Commandments and commanded Moses to fashion a tabernacle in a way which would involve almost every form of representational art (*italics his*).”⁴⁰⁵

The temple built by Solomon was decorated in an even more elaborate fashion. In addition to the tabernacle furnishings which were transferred to the temple, new work was done. Cherubim decorated the temple walls and doorposts (1 Kings 6:29, 32, 35),⁴⁰⁶ and a massive pair of wooden cherubim, overlaid with gold, stood 15 feet high and spanned over 15 feet from wingtip to wingtip in the inner sanctuary of the temple (1 Kings 6:23-28). The sea of bronze (1 Kings 7:25, 44) stood on twelve bulls, and its bronze rim was decorated with lily blossoms. The twelve mobile bronze basins (1 Kings 7:27-37) had side panels of hammered bronze depicting cherubim, lions, and bulls, and the support structures and “every available space” were decorated with cherubim, lions, and palm trees. The two bronze pillars commissioned by Solomon for the temple had no liturgical purpose⁴⁰⁷ but were festooned with hundreds of pomegranates, topped with lilies, and interwoven with chains (1 Kings 7:15-22). He overlaid the inside of the temple with gold decorated with palm trees and chains and adorned (literally, “overlaid...for beauty,” NAS footnote) the temple with precious stones (2 Chronicles 3:5-6). As with the pillars, these stones had no practical purpose but were placed in the temple for beauty.⁴⁰⁸ Decorations included creatures from heaven (the cherubim) and the earth (gold, precious stones, plants and animals). Schaeffer also notes that “the temple, like the tabernacle, was

⁴⁰⁵ Schaeffer, *Art and the Bible*, 12.

⁴⁰⁶ Douma, *Ten Commandments*, 54.

⁴⁰⁷ Schaeffer, *Art and the Bible*, 16.

⁴⁰⁸ *Ibid.*, 15.

not planned by man. Once more, the Scripture insists that the plan derived from God. David, the chronicler, gave Solomon ‘the pattern of all that he had by the Spirit’ for the various parts of the temple (1 Chronicles 28:11-12). And verse 19 reads, ‘All this, said David, have I been made to understand in writing from the hand of Jehovah, even all the works of this pattern.’⁴⁰⁹

The use of art in the temple and tabernacle suggests that flat (e.g. woven yarn), bas relief, and carved images are permissible. These images include depictions of creatures of heaven, the cherubim (whose image was a “likeness of things invisible”⁴¹⁰ and for whom no description of their appearance was recorded), and creatures of the earth, various plants and animals.

Idolatry in the New Testament.

Idolatry is condemned in the New Testament (1 Corinthians 5:10-11, 10:14; Galatians 5:20; 1 Peter 4:3; 1 John 5:21). Each of these citations likely refers to worship of a physical idol, but greed or covetousness is also decried as idolatry,

For of this you can be sure: No immoral, impure or greedy person — such a man is an idolater — has any inheritance in the kingdom of Christ and of God.
(Ephesians 5:5)

Put to death, therefore, whatever belongs to your earthly nature: sexual immorality, impurity, lust, evil desires and greed, which is idolatry (eidololatria, εἰδωλολατρία). (Colossians 3:5)

The biblical proscription is not against the object of desire, but rather against the person’s ungodly, inappropriate attitude toward it. It is not money which is evil, but the love of money which is to be rejected (1 Timothy 6:10). Jesus agreed that money can

⁴⁰⁹ Shaeffer, *Art and the Bible*, 15.

⁴¹⁰ John of Damascus, *Three Treatises*, 53.

become an idol, “No one can serve two masters. Either he will hate the one and love the other, or he will be devoted to the one and despise the other. You cannot serve both God and Money.” (Matthew 6:24). It is man’s inordinate love of money which can displace God and become his idol. Individuals and churches do not avoid money absolutely simply because of the risk of possible greed. The biblical declaration that greed is idolatry provides an important clue in analyzing other forms of idolatry. It is not the physical object that is condemned, whether money or a carved or painted image. Rather, it is the use of the object which must be scrutinized. If the object has replaced God, it is an idol (Romans 1:23, 25).⁴¹¹ However, if it used for God’s purposes, whether money or an image, it can be permitted.

An image and idol should not be conflated. It is the heart of the individual which determines the guilt of idolatry. Thus, the New Testament agrees that images cannot be considered idols independent of their use.

Spiritual Worship

The Bible clearly states, in the Old and New Testaments, that God cannot be seen (Deuteronomy 4:15; John 1:18; 1 Timothy 6:16). Jesus, in his encounter with the Samaritan woman, said, “God is spirit, and his worshippers must worship in spirit and in truth” (John 4:24). These two points led Karlstadt, Zwingli, and Calvin to focus on the spiritual aspect of worship and to oppose images. Further reflection on the nature of the Godhead reveals that “the eternal Father, Son, and Holy Spirit are nonphysical.”⁴¹² There is little question regarding the nonmaterial nature of the Father and the Spirit, and

⁴¹¹ Harold W. Hoehner, *Ephesians, An Exegetical Commentary* (Grand Rapids: Baker Academic, 2002), 660.

⁴¹² Douma, *Ten Commandments*, 44.

Douma's statement is carefully worded to stress that the *eternal* Son is nonmaterial, for the Bible states that "the Word *became* flesh" (John 1:14) and that God "was *revealed* in the flesh" (1 Timothy 3:16, NAS).⁴¹³

The command to worship God in spirit because he is a non-material, spiritual Being often leads to a misunderstanding of our spiritual natures. Douma writes that with this limited view,

The 'spiritual' is often viewed as unique and superior, and the material viewed as inferior. What is important is not seeing, but thinking. God is spirit, and anyone who worships Him must worship Him in spirit and truth. People explain this verse from John 4 in such a way that the 'spiritual' service of God consists of an inner service in contrast to an outward service. The internal efforts of the heart are more important than the external labor that can be seen with our eyes. God must be worshiped in [*sic*] a spiritual manner, consistent with His spiritual, nonphysical nature.⁴¹⁴

He argues that such an understanding of worship leads to four potential errors. An excessive stress on the spiritual interpretation of the second commandment seems to make the command nothing more than a tautology, a needless repetition. Secondly, such a view leads to a dualistic view of man, "in which the spiritual stands nearer to God than the physical. With the eyes of our spirit we come closer to God than with the eyes of our body."⁴¹⁵ Luther and Calvin had appropriately rejected any body-spirit dualism. Actually, God cannot be approached with *any* human organ; "The distance between Creator and creature cannot be bridged with our eyes, and neither with our understanding"⁴¹⁶ ("No eye has seen, no ear has heard, no mind has conceived what God has prepared for those who love him." 1 Corinthians 2:9). Also, Scripture states that men do see God. God

⁴¹³ Douma, *Ten Commandments*, 44.

⁴¹⁴ *Ibid.*, 45.

⁴¹⁵ *Ibid.*

⁴¹⁶ *Ibid.*, 46.

appeared to Abraham before the destruction of Sodom (Genesis 18:1), and Jacob said that he had seen God face to face (Genesis 32:30). The elders of Israel, along with Moses, Aaron, Nadab, and Abihu saw God and ate and drank with him (Exodus 24:11). Moses spoke with God face to face and saw his form (Numbers 12:8).⁴¹⁷ Despite these appearances, definite limitations remained because God said to Moses, “You cannot see my face, for no one may see me and live” (Exodus 33:20). But, as Douma points out, all of our senses are similarly restricted. Without God we are unable to see, hear, or understand, “‘Be ever hearing, but never understanding; be ever seeing, but never perceiving,’ make the heart of this people calloused; make their ears dull and close their eyes.” (Isaiah 6:9-10). Finally, Douma believes that there has been a misunderstanding in contrasts. Often the spiritual is contrasted with the physical, but he notes that “Spirit characterizes God, just as flesh characterizes creatures.” He continues, “The contrast is thus not with the physical (as [proven] in Luke 24:39⁴¹⁸ and Isaiah 31:3), but with what is weak and fleshly, what is transient and transitory.”⁴¹⁹ Therefore, the difference is not between an external or visual worship and some sort of “inner” worship that Jesus brought, but “the contrast is rather between the transitory temple ministry and the everlasting life-giving power of Christ.”⁴²⁰ True spiritual worship, therefore, is not worship devoid of externals, but one dependent on the permanent, transforming power of God.

Lenski notes that “must” (δεῖ) in John 4:24 is not indicative of a new precept, commandment, or worship. Rather, “this ‘must’ expressed far more, namely a necessity

⁴¹⁷ Douma, *Ten Commandments*, 46.

⁴¹⁸ Luke 24:39, “Look at my hands and my feet. It is I myself! Touch me and see; a ghost does not have flesh and bones, as you see I have.”

⁴¹⁹ Douma, *Ten Commandments*, 48.

⁴²⁰ *Ibid.*

that is due to God's own nature and that has always held and always will hold true."⁴²¹

The focus of Jesus' statement is that God desires, as he always has, a broken, contrite, and believing heart — not sacrifices, gifts, and festival days. He writes, "The new feature which Jesus presents is that from now on this worship is enough, i.e., that the ceremonies, restrictions of time and of place, are even now to fall away. In this sense the worship will, indeed, be new."⁴²²

In summary, the Old Testament clarifies that images are not inherently evil. As in the tabernacle and temple, images of heavenly and earthly creatures are permissible. Idolatry is committed when an image is worshipped, but both Testaments allow for the use of images or physical objects in worship. The critical factor is the purpose of an object, which becomes forbidden when it replaces God. Moreover, spiritual worship does not exclude external forms; rather it is worship magnified by the power of Christ. But another question remains: are depictions of God forbidden? To answer this question, each person of the Godhead must be evaluated in terms of the record of his visual imagery in the Bible.

Depictions of God: The Father, Son and Spirit

The Bible states that God is invisible and men have not seen his form, nor can they see him (Deuteronomy 4:12, 15; John 1:18; 5:37; Colossians 1:15; 1 Timothy 1:17; 6:16). And if men could see God, they would die (Exodus 33:20). Yet, as noted above, there are several occasions where Scripture claims that men have seen God:

⁴²¹ R. C. H. Lenski, *The Interpretation of St. John's Gospel*, (Minneapolis: Augsburg Publishing House, 1943), 325.

⁴²² *Ibid.*, 325-326.

The LORD appeared to Abraham near the great trees of Mamre while he was sitting at the entrance to his tent in the heat of the day. Abraham looked up and saw three men standing nearby. When he saw them, he hurried from the entrance of his tent to meet them and bowed low to the ground. (Genesis 18:1-2)

So Jacob called the place Peniel, saying, 'It is because I saw God face to face, and yet my life was spared.' (Genesis 32:30)

Moses and Aaron, Nadab and Abihu, and the seventy elders of Israel went up and saw the God of Israel. Under his feet was something like a pavement made of sapphire, clear as the sky itself. But God did not raise his hand against these leaders of the Israelites; they saw God, and they ate and drank. (Exodus 24:9-11)

With him [Moses] I speak face to face, clearly and not in riddles; he sees the form of the LORD. Why then were you not afraid to speak against my servant Moses? (Numbers 12:8)

Throughout church history, these events have often been explained as a theophany, a visible appearance of the *second* person of the Trinity before his Incarnation. At special times God has made himself visible to men in some limited form, but no man has ever seen the fullness of God.

The experiences of Moses provide further clarification. Moses' first encounter with God was recorded in Exodus 3:1-9. The people of Israel had been enslaved for 400 years under the Egyptians and their cries for relief came up to God. God chose Moses to lead his people out of bondage and began his relationship with Moses by appearing in a burning bush:

Now Moses was tending the flock of Jethro his father-in-law, the priest of Midian, and he led the flock to the far side of the desert and came to Horeb, the mountain of God. There the angel of the LORD appeared to him in flames of fire from within a bush. Moses saw that though the bush was on fire it did not burn up. So Moses thought, 'I will go over and see this strange sight — why the bush does not burn up.' When the LORD saw that he had gone over to look, God called to him from within the bush, 'Moses! Moses!' And Moses said, 'Here I am.' (Exodus 3:1-4).

Here the identity of the angel of the LORD is more than a mere messenger (the Hebrew word for “angel” means “messenger”). Note that the angel of the LORD appeared in the flames and “the *Lord* saw that he had gone over to look, *God* called to him from within the bush” (italics his).⁴²³ The angel of the LORD, the LORD, and God are used interchangeably. Ryken notes that “the angel of the LORD is so closely identified with God that the burning bush is generally considered a theophany. In other words, it was a God-appearance, a visible manifestation of the invisible God.”⁴²⁴ Moses was clearly in the presence of God. He saw a bush aflame yet not consumed, but the bush was not God. Since God is formless and this was a limited and unique manifestation, the burning bush cannot be used to serve as a universal visible image of God.

Exodus 33:11 records that “The Lord would speak to Moses face to face, as a man speaks with his friend.” When Moses asked to see God’s glory, God agreed but warned him, “But you cannot see me and live.” Moses was hidden by God in a cleft in the rock. God passed and said, “Then I will remove my hand and you will see my back; but my face must not be seen.” (Exodus 33:20, 23). But later when the LORD came down in a pillar of cloud and spoke to Aaron and Miriam, he said of Moses, “With him I speak face to face, clearly and not in riddles; he sees the form of the LORD.”⁴²⁵ (Numbers 12:8). Deuteronomy 34:10 records that there was no prophet like Moses, “whom the LORD knew face to face.” When Scripture speaks of God as having a face or a back, these descriptions are anthropomorphisms — ascriptions of human form to God which he does not actually possess. Instead, God is spirit (John 4:24) and has no form (e.g. Deuteronomy 4:12). On the surface there appears to be a paradox. However, the intent of

⁴²³ Ryken, *Exodus*, 81.

⁴²⁴ Ibid.

⁴²⁵ Douma, *Ten Commandments*, 46.

these passages is to emphasize that God had a special relationship with Moses. God spoke with special clarity to Moses, “face to face (literally, “mouth to mouth”) and not in riddles (i.e. something elusive or obscure in the words of the prophets⁴²⁶). God revealed himself to other prophets through dreams and visions and in riddles, but with Moses there was no medium.⁴²⁷ The communication was direct with “a clear distinctness of spiritual communication...with the same closeness and freedom with which friends converse together.”⁴²⁸ Did Moses see a “form of God” in his “face to face” encounter? The reference to this event in Numbers 12:8 refers back to Moses’ encounter when he requested to see the glory of God. As Wenham notes, “On that occasion he had to be content with seeing God’s ‘back’ (Exodus 33:18-23). The word ‘form’ (Hebrew, *ûtimùnâṭ* נִתְּנָה,) is used of visual representations, pictures or images, of earthly and heavenly beings (Exodus 20:4),”⁴²⁹ the same word used in the condemnation of idolatry. Just as an idol is a visual representation of a false god, and is not the “deity” itself, so Moses saw a “form” of God, but never saw the very being of God.

The passages regarding Moses’ encounter with the LORD focus on his unique relationship and do not support a physical form for God. God spoke out of the burning bush, but God is not the burning bush. He spoke out of the pillar of fire and cloud (Exodus 13:21), but God was not the pillar. He spoke out of the fire, deep darkness, and black clouds at the foot of Mount Sinai, but Israel heard only a voice and saw no form

⁴²⁶ James D. G. Dunn and John W. Robinson, ed. *Commentary of the Bible* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmanns, 2003), 142.

⁴²⁷ Gordon Wenham, *Tyndale Old Testament Commentaries, Numbers* (Leicester, England: Intervarsity Press, 1981), 112.

⁴²⁸ C. F. Keil and F. Delitzsch, *Commentary on the Old Testament, Pentateuch* (Peabody, Massachusetts: Hendrickson, 2006), 704.

⁴²⁹ Wenham, *Numbers*, 113.

(Deuteronomy 4:11-12). Despite God's rare appearances to men, the episodes do not support the use of an image for God.

Images and the Incarnation

Zwingli had admitted that the Incarnation could be the greatest obstacle for the opponent of images. Man was created in the image of God and still bears that image to some extent after the Fall (Genesis 1:27; 9:6). The image has been defaced but not destroyed. In his Incarnation, the Son became a baby and had the true physical body of a man. Jesus was fully God and fully man — a undisputed fact in orthodox Christianity. Because of his hypostatic union, Jesus bears God's image in a way not borne by other men, i.e. by their descent from Adam. Jesus, unlike all other men, is the “image of the invisible God” (ὅς ἐστιν εἰκὼν τοῦ θεοῦ τοῦ ἀοράτου, Colossians 1:15; τοῦ Χριστοῦ, ὅς ἐστιν εἰκὼν τοῦ θεοῦ. 2 Corinthians 4:4) and “the radiance of God's glory and the exact representation of his being” (ὅς ὦν ἀπαύγασμα τῆς δόξης καὶ χαρακτῆρ τῆς ὑποστάσεως αὐτοῦ, Hebrews 1:3). But Jesus was not a phantom. His disciples insisted that he was truly a man, known by all senses, “That which was from the beginning, which we have heard, which we have seen with our eyes, which we have looked at and our hands have touched — this we proclaim concerning the Word of Life...” (1 John 1:1). Unlike God the Father or the Spirit, the Son had a form during his Incarnation. Because he was a man, could he be depicted as a man?

John of Damascus (d. c.750) was an articulate supporter of the use of images of Christ. Like Zwingli, he recognized that the strongest argument for the support of images was the Incarnation. At the Incarnation, the invisible God became visible, the formless

God took on form (Philippians 2:6-8). John wrote, “Therefore, I am emboldened to depict the invisible God, not as invisible, but as he became visible for our sake, by participation in flesh and blood. I do not depict the invisible divinity, but I depict God made visible in the flesh.”⁴³⁰ When God said in Deuteronomy 4:12, “You heard the sound of words but saw no form,” this statement was no longer true after the Incarnation. Men, in fact, did see, hear, and touch Jesus. Since Jesus had the form of a man (Philippians 2:7-8), can he not be depicted as man? John lauds the wisdom of Moses in his admonition not to depict the invisible God,

What wisdom the legislator has! How could the invisible be depicted? How could the unimaginable be portrayed? How could one without measure or size or limit be drawn? How could the formless be made? How could the bodiless be depicted in color?...For it is clear that when you see the bodiless become human for your sake, then you may accomplish the figure of a human form; when the invisible becomes visible in the flesh, then you may depict the likeness of something seen; when one who, by transcending his own nature, is bodiless, formless, incommensurable, without magnitude or size, that is, one who is in the form of God, taking on the form of a slave, by this reduction to quantity and magnitude puts on the characteristics of a body, then depict him on a board and set up to view the One who has accepted to be seen.⁴³¹

For John of Damascus, therefore, images were entirely justified because God, who was without form in the Old Testament, had revealed himself in his Son at the Incarnation. Images of Jesus were not an attempt to depict the invisible, but to show God made visible in Jesus. His image was not to be worshipped, but to be “set up as memorials, and were honored not as gods, but as leading to a recollection of divine activities.”⁴³² Thus, the purpose of images was to serve as reminders of the deeds of God.

Two primary objections arise. First, to depict the Son as a man will diminish his deity. However, the converse can also be problematic. The deity of Jesus can be over-

⁴³⁰ John of Damascus, *Three Treatises*, 22.

⁴³¹ *Ibid.*, 24.

⁴³² *Ibid.*, 32.

emphasized such that his humanity is almost forgotten. Failure to appreciate his humanity also diminishes his glory. He became man in order to redeem his people and save them from their sins. His death on the cross cannot be marginalized, for it is the foundation of our faith. Secondly, since the physical appearance of Jesus is unknown, any attempt to depict him is a violation of the ninth commandment, for it constitutes a false portrayal. However, such a view would eliminate the visual portrayal, written description, or mental image of any person or event. The same logic would forbid the portrayal of any historical person for we do not know their exact appearance. Even contemporaneous portraits cannot be allowed because of the likelihood that the artist may take an opportunity to improve or alter the appearance of the person. Historical events could not be shown, because we do not know the exact arrangement of every detail of the event. Even photographs cannot be permitted since there is often liberty taken in avoiding unattractive details of the person or place. Rigid adherence to this view necessitates the rejection of all images of anything in creation. Such a position is precisely the rule in Islam where only sacred writings and geometric designs (“arabesque”) are allowed. However, God’s people have never had such severe restrictions, as evidenced by God’s commands regarding the tabernacle and temple.

Images and the Holy Spirit

Descriptions of an image of the Holy Spirit are rare in Scripture. The account of Jesus’ baptism (Matthew 3:13-17; Mark 1:9-11; Luke 3:21-22; and John 1:32-34) comes with the opening of the heavens and the descent of the Holy Spirit. Luke alone

“emphasizes the concrete nature of the experience by speaking of a descent in bodily form (somatiko eidei, σωματικῶ εἶδει).”⁴³³ The gospel accounts differ slightly,

As soon as Jesus was baptized, he went up out of the water. At that moment heaven was opened, and he saw the Spirit of God descending like a dove and lighting on him. (Matthew 3:16)

As Jesus was coming up out of the water, he saw heaven being torn open and the Spirit descending on him like a dove. (Mark 1:10)

...and as he was praying, heaven was opened and the Holy Spirit descended on him in bodily form like a dove. (Luke 3:21-22)

Then John gave this testimony: ‘I saw the Spirit come down from heaven as a dove and remain on him.’ (John 1:32)

Unlike Matthew and Mark, Luke does not use the term “he [Jesus] saw” (eiden, εἶδεν). Instead, Bock believes Luke’s description is more metaphorical — the Spirit’s descent was like a dove in floating gracefully through the air, because of his use of an adverb of manner (hos, ὡς). Despite Luke’s use of the phrase “bodily form,” Bock believes his account actually “minimizes the vision-like aspects of the account.”⁴³⁴ Although Matthew and Mark also state that Jesus saw the descent of the Spirit, John states that John the Baptist saw it too (“I saw, I beheld...” tetheamai, τεθέαμαι). It is clear that a visual encounter of some sort did occur, at least seen by Jesus and John the Baptist. Whether others saw it is not stated. The Bible gives no other description of an image of the Holy Spirit,⁴³⁵ and as a result, the depiction of the Holy Spirit in art has almost universally been that of a dove. As with “forms” of God in the Pentateuch accounts, the

⁴³³ Darrell L. Bock, *Baker Exegetical Commentary on the New Testament, Luke 1:1-9:50* (Grand Rapids: Baker Books, 1994), 338.

⁴³⁴ Ibid.

⁴³⁵ The passage in Acts 2:1-4 states that “a sound like the blowing of a violent wind can from heaven and filled the whole house...” and “what seemed like tongues of fire that separated and came to rest on each of them.” Either occurrence (the wind or fire) might be representative of the Holy Spirit, but seems more related to His effect on the disciples.

dove was not the Holy Spirit, but only a representation which occurred as a unique manifestation at a singular event. Since this event was historical and was witnessed by both Jesus and John the Baptist, there seems to be no proscription against depicting the Spirit as a dove in the baptism of Christ. But the dove cannot be used as a universal representation of the Holy Spirit, any more than a burning bush can be used as a universal image of God.

Thus, visual images of the Father and the Spirit are very rare in Scripture and occur only in unique circumstances. The eternal Son, before his Incarnation, may have rarely appeared in a theophany. The Father or the Spirit is never equated with these manifestations; they functioned merely as symbols. At his Incarnation, however, the Son became a man and took on flesh. And unlike the images or metaphors used by the Father and the Spirit, where the symbols used did not equate to the true God, Jesus was the true God-man. Images of Jesus are not an attempt to depict his deity, for that is neither possible nor permissible. They are, however, used as a reminder of God's love for us, his humility, and his sacrifice.

CHAPTER 5

CHRISTIAN ARTISTIC EXPRESSION

The original disagreement was not between Christians who embraced and Christians who rejected the First Commandment but between Christians who understood the First Commandment differently. No one denied that the First Commandment taught Christians to fear and love God beyond all else, to recognize him alone as their God, and to fix all their hope and trust in him. The quarrel was not over what to do, but how to do it.⁴³⁶

Art has been a significant factor in Christian worship since very early times. Not simply decorative, art played an important and supportive role in exegesis and doctrinal disputes. But, by the late Middle Ages, definite abuse had occurred with an emphasis on good works as a means to salvation. Pilgrimages, indulgences, and donations were stressed. The reformers objected to these activities and “their reading of Scripture, for better or worse, was colored by that historical situation,”⁴³⁷ and strongly influenced their opinions about art. Furthermore, art was not a primary concern for either Luther or Calvin — more pressing issues held their attention.

Instead, their efforts were directed to vigorous support for the Scriptural view that believers are saved by Christ alone, by faith alone, to the glory of God alone. Compelled by these beliefs, they struggled against the abuses of their time and were sometimes pushed to an extreme position in order to clarify a point. Calvin focused on the reformation of worship and forbade images because of gross abuse and his desire to achieve inner, spiritual worship. Luther’s primary stress was that we are saved by faith, not works. He considered art to be an “indifferent” matter, and allowed visual art in the

⁴³⁶ Steinmetz, “Reformation and Ten Commandments,” 266.

⁴³⁷ Dyrness, *Visual Faith*, 87.

church. Their opinions on religious art proved to have long-lasting effects. The Lutherans continued to allow religious art in worship, but the Calvinists and many Protestants eliminated all art in worship due to a misunderstanding of the second commandment and the meaning of spiritual worship. Luther's adamant support of salvation by faith and Calvin's reformation of worship and uncompromising opposition to religious visual art demonstrate their firm convictions in specific battles. As Jim Miller has observed, "It is characteristic of all emerging movements to over-emphasize one point till it is settled. In time, as the movement is more solid and secure, they will hold to it but move on to other issues."⁴³⁸

Related to these "other issues," William Dyrness has questioned one of Calvin's instructions on church order, in which he insisted "that outside of regular worship hours, the church building should be locked."⁴³⁹ This teaching probably gives explanation for the closure of Protestant sanctuaries during the week, but it is also relevant to his teaching on visual images and the need for a modern response. Calvin made this ruling because of the risk of superstitious devotions, "If anyone be found making any particular devotion inside or nearby [the church], he is to be admonished; if it appears to be a superstition which he will not amend he is to be chastised."⁴⁴⁰ Dyrness asks, "Even if Calvin, incensed by the practice of indulgences, had reason in his day to lock the church, why is it still locked?"⁴⁴¹ The same question remains for images. Even if Calvin had his reasons,

⁴³⁸ Jim Miller in a personal conversation over coffee at Brady's Coffee Shop in Tyler, Texas on 27 February 2007.

⁴³⁹ William A. Dyrness, "Contemplation for Protestants," *Image* 49 (Spring 2006), 71.

⁴⁴⁰ John Calvin, *Calvin: Theological Treatises*, ed. J. K. S. Reid, *Library of Christian Classics*, vol. 23 (Westminster: Westminster Press), 79, quoted in Dyrness, "Contemplation," 71.

⁴⁴¹ Dyrness, "Contemplation," 72.

in view of the medieval cult of saints and images, to prohibit any visual art in the church, why are many churches still bereft of art?

Scripture supports the valid use of religious art in the worship of God. The adornment of the tabernacle and temple with depictions of earthly and heavenly creatures proves that art in worship is not forbidden. Both Testaments condemn idolatry, and we are instructed to worship God in spirit and truth, but this command is best understood as worship directed to God through the power of Christ, rather than an “inner” worship. The whole man must be involved in the worship of the living God because, as Francis Schaeffer reflected, “Christianity is not just involved with ‘salvation’ but with the total man in the total world.”⁴⁴²

With the support of Scripture and an understanding of the means by which the two great Reformers arrived at differing positions on the role of religious art, the question arises about art’s use in modern worship. It is clear that images of animals, plants and people are allowed. Likewise, because of the Incarnation and his earthly life, portraits of Jesus and depictions of the events of his life are permissible.⁴⁴³ But what guidelines are needed to determine which art is legitimate? At least three perspectives must be explored: beauty, truth, and content.

Beauty

The meaning of beauty has changed over time. Plato taught that “beauty is a property of particular objects that are balanced, ordered, and possess internal unity.”⁴⁴⁴ In

⁴⁴² Schaeffer, *Art and the Bible*, 60.

⁴⁴³ Dyrness, *Visual Faith*, 37. From an Eastern Orthodox position, images of Christ are not just permissible, but required.

⁴⁴⁴ *Ibid.*, 70.

his terms, beauty was an objective property. John Locke, however, focused on how reality is experienced through the senses, and therefore beauty refers to the experience of the observer,⁴⁴⁵ leading to the modern notion that “beauty is in the eyes of the beholder.”⁴⁴⁶ From a biblical perspective, the issue is complicated by the lack of special Hebrew language for beauty, because “beauty was not something that occupied a separate part of their lives.”⁴⁴⁷ The various Hebrew words that speak of the beauty of God refer to admiration, adoration, praise, loveliness, or a visible expression of his holiness and power. Dyrness comments,

The splendor of beauty is grounded in the fact that it is inherent both in God himself and, by extension, in the creation that he has made and that bears his mark (it is, by God’s standards, ‘very good’)...Creaturely beauty is never despised as a lesser beauty — indeed the same word is frequently used in reference to the creature and to God...While we are likely to see beauty and goodness as projections of our personal and cultural values, biblical language connects these characteristics to God and grounds them in the created order.⁴⁴⁸

Therefore, all that is beautiful and true reflects who God is. All creation is beautiful because it praises and glorifies God.

Physical attractiveness alone does not fulfill the biblical requirement of beauty, for beauty must be connected with morality.⁴⁴⁹ The beauty of creation, for example, can be a motivation to praise the Creator, but it can also serve to distract men from their true end. Dyrness observes that this has been man’s problem from the beginning. When Satan tempted Adam and Eve to look at the forbidden fruit, they were drawn to the beauty of the tree and its fruit outside of the moral context in which it was given (Genesis 3:6).⁴⁵⁰

⁴⁴⁵ Dyrness, *Visual Faith*, 70.

⁴⁴⁶ Josh Bartlett, *Bartlett’s Familiar Quotations*, ed. Justin Kaplan (Boston: Little, Brown and Company, 2002), 606. This statement is attributed to Margaret Wolfe Hungerford in her book, *Molly Brown* (1878).

⁴⁴⁷ Dyrness, *Visual Faith*, 70.

⁴⁴⁸ *Ibid.*, 73-74.

⁴⁴⁹ *Ibid.*, 82.

⁴⁵⁰ *Ibid.*, 75.

After sin, the fruit was no longer truly beautiful. The Greek idea of beauty stands in remarkable contrast to the biblical view. Whereas in the Greek view, beauty conforms to Plato's formal ideal, the biblical view describes beauty as what is "fitting" or "proper."⁴⁵¹ Thus, "gray hair on an old man, strength in a youth, virtue in a woman, [and] words well spoken"⁴⁵² are beautiful (Proverbs 16:24; 20:29; 31:10). These characteristics reflect God's order. In the Old Testament, "the contrast is not between beauty and ugliness but between beauty in its setting, serving God's purpose, and beauty that is prostituted by leading away from the just order that God intended,"⁴⁵³ hence an admonition such as, "Do not lust in your heart after her beauty or let her captivate you with her eyes" (Proverbs 6:25). The prostitute may be physically beautiful, but her sin has corrupted her life.

Truth

Thus, beauty is not morally neutral; it must be connected with the truths of God. Art, as a human endeavor, must also be true. Although modern relativism resists such judgments, art can be determined to be true or false, good or bad.

Gerald Vann described bad art as "immoral,"⁴⁵⁴ because it distorts reality and lies. David Denny comments that Vann's "ire was directed not at pornography, but at kitsch, sentimental church art that has nothing to do with the way, the truth, and the life."⁴⁵⁵

⁴⁵¹ Thus, the offensive crucifix-in-a-beaker-of-urine is wrong because it is not "fitting" in view of the sacrifice of Christ.

⁴⁵² Dyrness, *Visual Faith*, 81.

⁴⁵³ *Ibid.*, 82.

⁴⁵⁴ David M. Denny, "Descending to the Roots," *Image* 49 (Spring, 2006), 65.

⁴⁵⁵ *Ibid.*

Sentimentality is rampant in the Christian church and condemned by sculptor David Robinson who berates

such ubiquitous ecclesiastical cartoon classics as the outstretched hallelujah hands, the doe-eyed woolly paschal unglute, and the descending dove-of-the Spirit invariably rendered in a show-stopping nosedive. In the hands of well-meaning evangelicals, the sublime images of the central narrative of western culture have been done up as spiritual flashcards, and have lost much in the translation. What can you really say with integrity about the Passion of Christ once you've been party to its representation on a Sunday-school felt board?⁴⁵⁶

Bad art is often easy to recognize. Pornographic “art”⁴⁵⁷ is immoral because it degrades women, and appeals to “mere sensuality” and the lust of the eyes (1 John 2:15-16). The chaotic paintings of Jackson Pollock, such as “Yellow Island” (1952), created by dripping black paint randomly from cans or brushes onto a raw canvas,⁴⁵⁸ are masterpieces of disorder and confusion. But such work does not reflect God’s order (Job 25:2).

Sentimentality is contrasted with the true Christian worldview which consists of a minor and major theme.⁴⁵⁹ The minor theme has two parts and includes the revolt of unbelieving men against God and their own sin and meaninglessness, but it also deals with the defeated and sinful side of the Christian’s life. The major theme, however, extols the meaningfulness and purposefulness of life. It affirms the existence of God, men made in his image, and solid optimism — an optimism which is grounded in the infinite, yet personal, God. The major theme also displays the morality based on God’s character. Schaeffer notes that man is fallen, flawed and sinful, but “he is redeemable on the basis of Christ’s work. This is beautiful. This is optimism. And this optimism has a sufficient

⁴⁵⁶ David Robinson, “Liturgical Lassitude; or, When Bad Art Happens to Good People,” *Image* 49 (Spring 2006), 36.

⁴⁵⁷ By “pornographic” I do not mean to include all nudity, but rather the lewd, lascivious depictions which twist the legitimate pleasure and joy that is appropriate in enjoying the bodies given to us by God.

⁴⁵⁸ Nicola Hodge and Libby Anson, *The A-Z of Art* (San Diego: Thunder Bay Press, 1996), 306.

⁴⁵⁹ Schaeffer, *Art and the Bible*, 57.

base.”⁴⁶⁰ Artists can be unbiblical by excessive emphasis on either theme. An emphasis only on the major theme is “not fully Christian, but simply romantic art.”⁴⁶¹ But an excessive stress on the lostness of man and the depravity of the universe is equally abnormal.

Content

The content of a work of art may arguably be its most critical perspective. T. S. Eliot cautioned that “art without intellectual content is vanity.”⁴⁶² Art’s content is linked to its purpose — for which Benedict XVI has offered a two-fold test: Does the art promote a higher integration of the person, or does it draw one into mere sensuality or irrationality? And is the art in harmony with the purpose and message of the Word?⁴⁶³ Likewise, Bernard of Clairvaux called for “a diaphanous art that called attention to the Creator more than to itself.”⁴⁶⁴ Content cannot be described independently of truth and God’s Word, but this does not suggest that art must be limited to religious topics or events, for God created all things. Nor is art limited to a particular style, but, as Schaeffer notes, “we must not be misled or naïve in thinking that various styles have no relation whatsoever to the content or the message of the work of art. Styles themselves are developed as symbol systems or vehicles for certain world views or messages.” He continues, “We must not use them [twentieth-century styles] in such a way as to be dominated by the world view out of which they have arisen.”⁴⁶⁵ Because a totally abstract

⁴⁶⁰ Schaeffer, *Art and the Bible*, 57.

⁴⁶¹ *Ibid.*, 58.

⁴⁶² Michael Capps, “Modes of Worship: Music in Liturgy,” *Image* 49 (Spring 2006), 41.

⁴⁶³ *Ibid.* Benedict’s test was in reference to music, but applies to the visual arts also.

⁴⁶⁴ Denny, “Descending to the Roots,” 62.

⁴⁶⁵ Schaeffer, *Art and the Bible*, 54.

painting carries no intellectual content, it cannot be used to bring the Christian message (except perhaps the chaos of a life without God, i.e. the “minor theme”). Robert Ryman’s “Ledger” (1982) is a square painted completely white because, according to Ryman, “White enables other things to become visible.”⁴⁶⁶ The painting’s content is so reduced that it is meaningless.

Since art involves a “transfiguration of the commonplace,”⁴⁶⁷ the presentation of things can differ from what may be expected. Thus, art must not be necessarily “photographic;” God commanded blue pomegranates to be incorporated in the tabernacle furnishings. Blue pomegranates do not exist in nature and are not realistic, but they are an expression of God’s imaginative plan. Therefore, the expression of the human artist’s imagination is expected in art, but “the artist’s world view is not free from the judgment of the Word of God.”⁴⁶⁸ Schaeffer concludes, “The biblical message, the good news, is a good news of content.”⁴⁶⁹ The required content, therefore, is the expression of the Christian world view in all its creativity, imagination, diversity, beauty, and goodness.

Great Art

Great art is “something like revelation. What is revealed has been there all the time, but it has gone unnoticed in our humdrum everyday experience. It needs the sensitivity of the artist to bring it to light, so that we notice things for the first time.”⁴⁷⁰ Just as poetry adds a dimension lacking in prose,⁴⁷¹ the visual arts can add something

⁴⁶⁶ Hodge, *A-Z of Art*, 333.

⁴⁶⁷ Jeremy Begbie, ed. *Beholding the Glory* (Grand Rapids: Baker Academic, 2001), 5.

⁴⁶⁸ Schaeffer, *Art and the Bible*, 43.

⁴⁶⁹ *Ibid.*, 54.

⁴⁷⁰ John MacQuarrie, *In Search of Humanity* (London: SCM, 1982), 195, quoted in Begbie, *Beholding the Glory*, xii.

⁴⁷¹ Schaeffer, *Art and the Bible*, 38.

beyond text. William Cowper gives a fine example of the different effects of different methods of writing, especially poetry,

... I, who scribble rhyme
 To catch the triflers of the time,
 And tell them truths divine and clear
 Which, couched in prose, they would not hear.⁴⁷²

It is a factual statement that all creation will praise God, but consider the power of a poetic interpretation of the same information in Psalm 98:7-9,

Let the sea resound, and everything in it, the world, and all who live in it.
 Let the rivers clap their hands, let the mountains sing together for joy;
 Let them sing before the LORD, for he comes to judge the earth.
 He will judge the world in righteousness and the peoples with equity.

Or consider the poem “Lift Me, Lord” extolling our need for God in the face of recurrent failures, recounting a personal experience as Paul does in Romans 7:7-25.

Lift me, Lord, for I fall and nothing stays me,
 Loveless and heedless, without faith or fear.
 I long to rise but lie unmoving here:
 The very self that wishes disobeys me.

Though one, my self divides and then betrays me:
 At once both dead, alive; sad, full of cheer;
 Not able — though I can — to persevere,
 I flee the sin that tangles and delays me.

So obstinate am I, so steeled in will,
 That fear of being lost and fear to lose you
 have never yet dissuaded me from ill.

⁴⁷² Gilbert Thomas, *William Cowper and the Eighteenth Century*, London: Ivor Nocholson and Watson, Ltd., 1935, 265, quoted by John Piper, “Insanity and Spiritual Songs in the Soul of a Saint,” 29 January 1992, available from http://www.desiringgod.org/ResourceLibrary/Biographies/1463_Insanity_and_Spiritual_Songs_in_the_Soul_of_a_Saint/

Work, then, your power and mercy so I choose you,
 since I know some who mend each day — and still
 find in myself but fresh desire to bruise you.

Fray Miguel de Guevara, c.1585-1646⁴⁷³

Music can also make us aware of God's truths and stimulate us to see his glory in ways beyond recitation of poetry or facts. The tune of the great hymn *Be Thou My Vision* was originally used with a secular text titled *With My Love on the Road*. The eighth century Irish text was translated into English and united with the tune in 1919. Like the Christianizing of secular art in the ancient church, this song combines a secular tune with a text full of the high regard for God as our "Vision, Lord, Best Thought, Wisdom, Word, Great Father, High King, Inheritance, Treasure, Sun, Ruler and Heart."⁴⁷⁴ With a simple, lilting melody that is simultaneously pleading and restful, the power of this song shines far beyond the written words:

Be Thou my vision, O Lord of my heart;
 Naught be all else to me save that Thou art.
 Thou my best thought by day or by night,
 Waking or sleeping Thy presence my light.

Be Thou my wisdom, and Thou my true Word;
 I ever with Thee and Thou with me, Lord;
 Thou my great Father, I Thy true son;
 Thou in me dwelling, and I with Thee one.

Be Thou my battle-shield, sword for my fight,
 Be Thou my dignity, Thou my delight.
 Thou my soul's shelter, Thou my high tower.
 Raise Thou me heavenward, O Power of my power.

⁴⁷³ "Lift Me, Lord." *First Things*, Number 151, (March 2005), 9. Translated from the Spanish by Rhina P. Espaillat.

⁴⁷⁴ Kenneth W. Osbeck, *101 More Hymn Stories* (Grand Rapids: Kregel, 1985), 43.

Riches I heed not, nor man's empty praise,
 Thou mine inheritance, now and always;
 Thou and Thou only, first in my heart,
 High King of heaven my Treasure Thou art.

High King of heaven, my victory won,
 May I reach heaven's joys, O bright heaven's son,
 Heart of my own heart, whatever befall
 Still be my vision, O ruler of all.⁴⁷⁵

Likewise, the visual arts accomplish a similar task by making us see the world in a different way. In 1889, Vincent Van Gogh took a long walk in the countryside of southern France. The almond trees were in bloom, and soon the peach and cherry trees would begin to bud. He painted what he considered to be “probably the best landscape I've ever done,”⁴⁷⁶ entitled “Peach Trees in Blossom.” The ground is filled with broad, rough strokes of pale green and brick red, and the sky is a mix of steel blue fading pale to the horizon. A peach tree dominates the picture; its smooth bark reflects the colors of the land and the tree's branches — heavy with pinks, corals, and reds as it erupts with new life. Van Gogh admitted his intentions,

At the moment I am absorbed in the blooming fruit trees, pink peach trees, yellow-white pear trees. My brush stroke has no system at all. I hit the canvas with irregular touches of the brush, which I leave as they are. Patches of thickly laid-on color, spots of canvas left uncovered, here and there portions that are left absolutely unfinished, repetitions, savageries; in short, I am inclined to think that the result is so disquieting and irritating as to be a godsend to those people who have fixed preconceived ideas about technique.⁴⁷⁷

Is not the beauty of God's earth more vivid in what we see (Genesis 1:12), rather than what we read?

⁴⁷⁵ “Be Thou My Vision”, *The Hymnal for Worship and Celebration*, ed. Tom Fwettke (Waco, Texas: Word Music, 1986), 382

⁴⁷⁶ Bernard Zurcher, *Vincent Van Gogh: Art, Life, and Letters*, trans. by Helga Harrison (San Diego: Thunder Bay Press, 1985), 144.

⁴⁷⁷ *Ibid.*

Ron DiCianni painted “Simeon’s Moment” and captured an image of an old man tightly holding a baby to his chest. His head is thrown back in exuberance, his mouth is in mid-shout and a single tear trails from his eye as he recognizes the Promised One of God.⁴⁷⁸ A map of the world faintly overlies the entire painting, echoing the promise of the text of Luke 2:25-32. A cursory reading of the passage might miss the emotional impact of the event, but DiCianni unmistakably extends the joy of one old man’s reception of the gift of God to all redeemed viewers.

The Miami Holocaust Memorial honors the six million Jews murdered under Hitler. An almost unfathomable genocide is burned into the mind rather than read as words in a history book. Sculpted by Kenneth Triester, the scene is dominated by a 42 foot bronze hand and forearm, complete with the Auschwitz number, which rises from the ground and reaches for the sky.⁴⁷⁹ “The Sculpture of Love and Anguish” is a dying person’s final act. Over the forearm clamber 130 naked men, women, and children desperately seeking relief. The figures are in various forms of anguish — climbing, reaching, falling — and their faces are filled with screams of terror, bewilderment, and despair. His work is a heart-wrenching portrayal of the “minor theme” of Romans 3:15-16, “Their feet are swift to shed blood; ruin and misery mark their ways.”

The “Pietà” by Michelangelo was completed in 1499. Sculpted of white marble and standing almost six feet high, it depicts Mary seated, holding Jesus after his crucifixion and deposition. The work is not a strict depiction of biblical facts. Mary is seated with her dead Son ensconced in her elaborate and voluminous robe; her head is

⁴⁷⁸ Ron DiCianni and Neil Wilson, *Where You There?* (Brentwood, Tennessee: Integrity Publishers, 2004), 25.

⁴⁷⁹ Creation of the Miami Holocaust Memorial, available from http://www.chgs.umn.edu/Visual__Artistic_Resources/Public_Holocaust_Memorials/Miami_Holocaust_Memorial/miami_holocaust_memorial.html

bowed in reflection and grief. Jesus bears the marks of crucifixion; his head twisted abnormally in death. The marble is polished so smoothly that, to those able to touch it, it almost gives the “tactile experience of the texture of his luminous skin.”⁴⁸⁰ Mary appears very young, far younger than chronologically “correct.” The reasons for this depiction are uncertain but may be due to the resemblance to Nativity scenes or because of her “perpetual virginity.” Jesus is also smaller than anatomically “correct” in comparison to Mary. The entire work transports the viewer to a world where scenes have been conflated: the birth and death of Christ, the love of his mother, and the clear, tangible humanity of Jesus, sacrificed to redeem fallen men. Did not Michelangelo achieve a moving and confrontational portrayal of Romans 5:8, “But God demonstrates his own love for us in this: While we were still sinners, Christ died for us”?

According to Calvin Seerveld, “the characteristic that best defines a work of art is allusivity.”⁴⁸¹ Great art must hint at or allude to its true subject, “without explicit mention, referring to in a covert, or passing way.”⁴⁸² Art can evoke certain moods (especially with music or color), feelings (joy and indignation), and remembrances of events and people. Van Gogh reminds us of the perpetual wonder of spring through his unnatural brushworks and strong colors. DiCianni takes a few verses and creates an unforgettable image of absolute delight in the goodness and promise of God. Triester, without graphically portraying the gruesome death of millions, nonetheless confronts us with evil and the vulnerability and suffering of men, women, and children. And

⁴⁸⁰ Georges Duby and Jean-Luc Daval, ed. *Sculpture, Volume 2* (Cologne, Germany: Taschen, 2006), 613.

⁴⁸¹ Hilary Brand and Adrienne Chaplin, *Art and Soul* (Downers Grove, Illinois: Intervarsity Press, 2001), 123.

⁴⁸² Brand, *Art and Soul*, 123.

Michelangelo forces us to reflect on the death of Jesus, the God-man, in the ultimate proof of the Incarnation.

EPILOGUE

THE CHALLENGE FOR THE MODERN CHURCH

In my personal observations of the modern church in America, art plays a very small role in religious thought, reflection, or worship. This omission has frustrated our efforts to grasp the fullness of God. Certainly, such attempts are not fully possible, but important aspects of our faith are not well communicated to unbelievers or even among brothers and sisters in the Lord. Although words are an effective means of communication, it is widely recognized that literary works such as poetry can transmit ideas in a remarkably effective way — more so than a lengthy piece of prose. Therefore, if art can do something which words cannot or if art can communicate in a different or unique way, then every effort must be made to use art for God's purposes. The writing of commentaries, the preaching of sermons, the study of Scripture, and the fellowship of believers have as their goal the edification of the men, women, and children of Christ. Likewise, art, as an expression of God's Word, may be properly used for teaching, reproof and rebuke, correction, and training of righteousness (2 Timothy 3:16).

Although many opportunities are available for the proper use of art, some areas remain forbidden or unclear. Depictions of the God the Father are forbidden based on my understanding of the second Commandment and other texts. The arguments in support of icons used 1200 years ago are valid in respect to depictions of Jesus Christ, but the Eastern Church's use of icons as a conduit to the divine is problematic. Thus, images of Christ are acceptable as long as their use and our motive are not wrong. Besides the necessity to communicate the Christian worldview in a truthful and fitting manner, art

must never discourage worship or misdirect worship away from God. Vigilance to avoid Luther's and Calvin's great fear is essential.

With the mandate and guidelines briefly established, an important question arises: How should a local church practically implement the visual arts? Several aspects of the Christian life need additional emphasis because they seem to be rarely affirmed today. What of the value of the ordinary Christian life? The humanity of Jesus Christ? The need of stillness before God? The radical difference between a life dedicated to Christ and a life lived according to the world?

Thus, with the requirements of intellectually valid content, beauty as "what is fitting," and commitment to truth of the major and minor themes of our faith (the glory and love of God who gives meaning to our lives in conjunction with the truth of our revolt as unbelievers and our failures as his children), I propose that local churches can develop art which emphasizes themes which are too often ignored or under-emphasized. A wide variety of techniques are available for artistic expression, including paintings, mixed media, sculpture, textiles, ceramics, and stained glass.

Edward Knippers has used large scale paintings to unabashedly remind us of Christ's humanity by depicting him nude as he performs miracles and is crucified. His rather shocking depictions are effective but somewhat troubling. Are there not other ways in which we can remember that Jesus was indeed a man who suffered and was tempted in all things (Hebrews 4:15)?

James Turrell has created a "skyspace" in the Nasher Sculpture Center in Dallas which is a small room with a white interior and a rectangular opening in the roof through which only the sky is visible (not surrounding buildings or trees). As the clouds pass

overhead and the sky dramatically changes colors throughout the day, I am reminded of the quiet beauty of God's creation and the need to be still before him. Cannot large scale sculpture be created which promotes the sublime, and serves as a reminder of the transcendence of God, our distance from him, and the proper attitude of quiet due his grandeur and holiness?

Should not the church encourage paintings to validate the ordinary Christian life? Too often we succumb to the celebrity, and recall only the great heroes of the faith, realizing that we can never achieve the works of David, Paul, Martin Luther, or D. L. Moody. But is God not pleased with those whose lives are more ordinary? Did not the man who was faithful with only two talents receive the same approbation as the man with five (Matthew 25:21, 23)? Have we forgotten the name of Edward Kimball,⁴⁸³ who was "only" a Sunday school teacher and witnessed to D. L. Moody? Could a picture of a man faithfully singing at church, reading his Bible, weeping over a grave, or serving a meal to a poor man properly remind us that God's economy is not the same as ours?

And what of the vast difference that is supposedly present between the life of a child of God and the life of an unbeliever? Numerous studies have shown that most of those who claim to be Christians behave no differently than the rest of the world. Is this not an indictment of the shallowness or hypocrisy of their statements? Can the church call for artistic efforts to remind us that we are new creatures in Christ and have been dramatically transformed (2 Corinthians 5:17)?

⁴⁸³ "The D. L. Moody Story," Moody Ministries, available from http://www.moodyministries.net/crp_MainPage.aspx?id=64

Art encouraged by the church can have a profound positive impact on our lives as believers. It can serve to remind us of the faith's great mysteries: the immanence and transcendence of God, the humanity and deity of Christ, the great difference in a life dedicated to God and one lived in selfishness, the need for quiet and reflection amid our hectic daily lives, and the simple nobility of an ordinary life in Christ. And yet these tasks are difficult.

Because God is infinitely complex and beyond description, our ability to understand and worship him is limited. Some of God's attributes are revealed in nature, more fully in his Word, and most completely in his one and only Son. Christians have tried for millennia to express our love for him, but all our attempts are feeble. Imperfect men cannot capture the perfections of God in any format — speech, written word, song, music, sculpture, paint, or even our lives. But these small efforts demonstrate our love for Him who first loved us. *Soli Deo Gloria.*

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