

Editorial note from the PCA Historical Center: In the digitizing of this study, the approach taken is that this is not a work of great *historic* value, and therefore, typographical errors have been cleaned up, yet without drawing attention to the presence of those errors in the original text of *Documents of Synod*. One significant error is flagged by citing the error in red print. This occurs on page 336, where the text identifies the author of a quote as “**Shelton**”. Instead, the author of the quote was John Murray, and the citation should be to page 126 of Murray’s article, “The Theology of the Westminster Confession of Faith,” in *Scripture and Confession*, John H. Skilton, editor.

It should also be pointed out that, in the providence of God, the RPCES never instituted the proposed changes in its edition of the Westminster Confession or Catechisms, due to its reception into the PCA in 1982.

159th GS MINUTES, MAY 22, 1981, pp. 189-207

***REPORT OF THE SPECIAL COMMITTEE OF SYNOD
ON PICTURES OF CHRIST***

The Rev. Allan Baldwin presented the following report for the committee, which included the following members: Allan Baldwin, chairman; Wyatt George, Charles Anderson, Ted Smith, and Stephen Ford:

Introduction

The following overture came before the 158th General Synod:

OVERTURE E

"The Southwest Presbytery overtures synod meeting in the summer of 1980 in Seattle, Wash., to (1) clarify what sins are forbidden in the Larger Catechism No. 109. Particularly, is the use of pictures of Christ in the Christian education of the church forbidden? (2) Is the Larger Catechism answer to 109 in accordance with Scripture when it forbids any use of pictures of Christ?"

The action of synod was to establish a committee "to study this issue and report its findings to the 159th General Synod."

Our committee, thus appointed to study the issue of L.C. 109 and its relationship to the second commandment, presents its report according to the following outline:

I. Consideration of L.C. 109, concluding that it does, in fact, forbid any use of pictures of Christ.

II. Consideration of Exodus 20:4-6; concluding that L.C. 109 goes beyond Scripture in forbidding all uses of pictures of Christ.

III. Consideration of pastoral approaches to the issues raised through this study of L.C. 109 and Exodus 20:4-6.

I. Consideration of L. C. 109

The outline of this section is:

- A. Historic context of the Westminster Assembly
- B. Larger Catechism Question and Answer 109
- C. Interpretation of L.C. 109
- D. Conclusions

A. Historic context of the Westminster Assembly

An excellent summary of the historic events and positions taken regarding the teaching and application of the second commandment is found in Charles Hodge's *Systematic Theology*, Vol. III, from which we will quote at some length:

The founders of the Christian Church were Jews. The religion of the Old Testament in which they had been educated forbade the use of images in divine worship. All the heathen were worshippers of idols. Idol-worship, therefore, was an abomination to the Jews. . . . It was not until three centuries after the introduction of Christianity that the influence of the heathen element introduced into the Church was strong enough to overcome the natural opposition to their use in the service of the sanctuary. Three parties soon developed themselves in connection with this subject. The first adhered to the teachings of the Old Testament and the usage of the Apostolic Churches, and repudiated the religious use of images in any form. The second allowed the use of images and pictures for the purpose of instruction, but not for worship. The common people could not read, and therefore it was argued that visible representations of Scriptural persons and incidents were allowable for their benefit. The third contended for their use not only a means of instruction, but also for worship. As early as A. D. 305, the Council of Elvira in Spain condemned the use of pictures in the Church.

In A.D. 726 the Emperor Leo III issued an ordinance forbidding the use of images in churches as heathenish and heretical. To support his action a council was called, which met in Constantinople A.D. 754, and which gave ecclesiastical sanction to this condemnation. In A.D. 787, however, the Empress Irene, under Roman influence, called a council, which Romanists of the Italian school consider ecumenical, at Nice, by which image-worship was fully sanctioned.... This Council, therefore, declared the previous Council, called by Leo III, heretical, and ordained the worship of pictures in the churches; not indeed with *latreia*, or the reverence due to God, but with *aspasmos kai timatika proskunasis* (with salutations and reverent prostrations). The Council announced the principle on which image-worship, whether among the heathen or Christians, has generally been defended, i.e., that the worship paid the image terminates on the object which it represents.

The decisions of this Council, although sanctioned by the Pope, gave offense to the Western Churches. The Emperor Charlemagne not only caused a book to be written (entitled '*Libri Carolini*') to refute the doctrines inculcated, but also summoned a council to meet . . . where the decrees of the so-called General Council of Nice were "rejected," "despised," and "condemned." All worshipping of pictures and images was forbidden, but their presence in the churches for instruction and ornament was allowed.

The friends of image-worship, however, rapidly gained the ascendancy, so that Thomas Aquinas, one of the best as well as the greatest of the Romish theologians in the thirteenth century, held the extreme doctrine on this subject. He taught that images were to be used in the churches for three purposes, first, for the instruction of the masses who could not read; secondly, that the mystery of the incarnation and the examples of the saints may be excited, as men are more easily moved by what they see than by what they hear. He taught that to the image in itself and for itself no reverence is due, but that if it represents Christ, the reverence due to Christ is due to the image.

(pp. 296-298)

The pre-Reformation period of church history, then, is characterized by general acceptance of the use of images in worship, interspersed with sometimes violent, sometimes more moderate opposition to that practice.

In commenting on this period, Philip Schaff notes that with the Synod of Constantinople (842 A.D.), image-worship was to become firmly entrenched: "In the East images were confined to colored representations on a plane surface, and mosaics, but excluded sculptures and statues from objects of worship. The Roman church makes no such restrictions" (*History of the Christian Church*, Vol. IV, p. 451). He goes on to suggest that the iconoclastic or anti-image position failed to carry the day due to its lack of a positive program. "The chief defect and the cause of its failure was its negative character. It furnished no substitute for image-worship, and left nothing to satisfy the religious wants of the Greek race" (p. 452).

When we come to the Reformation period of church history, we find unanimity on the part of the Protestants in opposing image-worship. Edward Morris (*Theology of the Westminster Symbols*) observes that "primitive Protestantism, especially in the Reformed communion, was strongly opposed to all pictures, even of Christ, in the sanctuaries, as savoring of superstition, if not of idolatry" (p. 528). The Protestant creeds reflected this opposition to image-worship: "The Protestant creeds, from that of Augsburg and the Articles of Smalcald down to the Scotch Confession and the 39 Articles, are united and most positive in their hostility to such image-worship in whatever variety" (E. Morris, *op. cit.*, p. 135).

The Reformed communions objected to image-worship, but also the very manufacturing of images, as offensive to the majesty of God. So John Calvin (*The Institutes*, Book 1, XI) asserts:

The majesty of God is defiled by an absurd and indecorous fiction, when he who is incorporeal is assimilated to corporeal matter; he who is invisible to a visible image; he who is spirit to an inanimate object; and he who fills all space to a bit of paltry wood, or stone, or gold.... Hence it is manifest, that whatever statues are set up or pictures painted to represent God, are utterly displeasing to him, as a kind of insult to his majesty" (pp. 91-92).

It is not only the worship of images but the making of the same which is found, by Calvin, to contradict the nature and honor of God.

The Heidelberg Catechism, a product of the Synod of Dort (Nov. 1618 to May 1619), reflects this emphasis of Calvin upon the majesty and nature of God. Questions 96 through 98 from the Heidelberg Catechism are pertinent to this background sketch, and quoted in full:

Question 96. What does God require in the second commandment?

Answer. That we in no wise represent God by images, nor worship him in any other way than he has commanded in his word.

Question 97. Are images then not at all to be made?

Answer. God neither can nor may be represented by any means; but as to creatures, though they may be represented, yet God forbids us to make, or have any resemblance of them, either in order to worship them, or to serve God by them.

Question 98. But may not images be tolerated in the churches, as books to the laity?

Answer. No; for we must not pretend to be wiser than God, who will have his people taught not by dumb images, but by the lively preaching of his word" (quoted from Ursinus' commentary on the Heidleberg Catechism, pp. 517, 524, 530)

Answer 97, when it says, "God neither can nor may be represented by any means," is echoing Calvin in recognizing that the very nature of God precludes the making of representations; it follows Calvin in judging all attempts to do so as dishonoring to God. Ursinus' summary sounds the same note: "In short, God ought not to be represented by any graven image, because he does not will it, nor can it be done, nor would it profit any thing if it were done" (p. 526).

B. Larger Catechism Question and Answer 109.

Question: What are the sins forbidden in the second commandment?"

Answer: The sins forbidden in the second commandment are, all devising, counseling, commanding, using, and any wise approving, any religious worship not instituted by God himself; tolerating a false religion; the making any representation of God, of all or of any of the three persons, either inwardly in our mind, or outwardly in any kind of image or likeness of any creature whatsoever; all worshipping of it, or God in it or by it; the making of any representation of feigned deities, and all worship of them, or service belonging to or taking from it, whether invented and taken up of ourselves, or received by tradition from others, though under the title of antiquity, custom, devotion, good intent, or any other pretence whatsoever; Simony; sacrilege; all neglect, contempt, hindering, and opposing the worship and ordinances which God hath appointed."

C. Interpretation of L.C. 109.

It is apparent that false worship is the overarching concern of L.C. 109. Each of the following phrases, contained in L.C. 109, bears on false worship in one way or another:

—"all devising, counseling, commanding, using, and any wise approving, any religious worship not instituted by God himself"

—"all worshipping of it" (i.e., a representation of God)

—"the making of any representation of feigned deities, and all worship of them, or service belonging to them;"

—"all superstitious devices, corrupting the worship of God, adding to it or taking from it, etc."

—"Simony"

—"sacrilege"

—"all neglect, contempt, hindering, and opposing the worship and ordinances which God hath appointed."

The context of L.C. 109 also bears out this concern with false worship. Both L.C. 109 and L.C. 110 evidence the same focus on worship.

L. C. 108

Question: What are the duties required in the second commandment?

Answer: The duties required in the second commandment are, the receiving, observing, and keeping pure and entire, all such religious worship and ordinances as God hath instituted in his word."

L. C. 110

Question: What are the reasons annexed to the second commandment?

Answer: The reasons annexed to the second commandment, the more to enforce it...

are, besides God's sovereignty over us, and propriety in us, his fervent zeal for his own worship, and his revengeful indignation against all false worship,"

Samuel Rutherford, one of the Scottish delegates at the Westminster Assembly, caught the essence of L.C. 109 when he wrote:

"Wee are forbidin ether to mak or to worship ane image representing God, or to give ether inward or outward worship, ether with heart or knee or bodie to any creature or image." (quoted by Morris, op, cit., p. 135)

And Riagley, commenting on L.C. 109 likewise found the focus falling on false worship. He wrote:

"To consider the sins forbidden in this commandment, the general scope and design hereof as to what concerns the negative part of it, is God's prohibiting all false worship, either in our hearts, outward actions or gestures, whereby we adhere to our own imaginations rather than his revealed will; which is the only rule of instituted worship" (p. 459).

While the L.C. 109 is primarily concerned, then, with false worship, it does, in fact, contain two phrases which do not bear specifically upon false worship, although they are related to it.

The first phrase is this: "tolerating a false religion." This phrase is broader than false worship, although it certainly includes false worship.

The other phrase not specifically dealing with false worship follows the above mentioned phrase in L.C. 109, and is: "the making any representation of God, of all or of any of the three person, either inwardly in our mind, or outwardly in any kind of image or likeness of any creature whatsoever." Why is this phrase included in L.C. 109? The obvious answer is that the Westminster divines believed that the second commandment called for such a statement. But it is important for the purposes of this study to ask: were not the men of the Westminster Assembly influenced, to a degree, by the religious context in which they worked and with which they contended?

D. Conclusions

At this point, the comments of **Shelton** are germane; in speaking of the nature of doctrinal symbols he writes:

"It should be borne in mind that the creeds of the church have been framed in a particular historical situation to meet the need of the church in that context, and have been oriented to a considerable extent in both their negative and positive declarations to the refutation of the errors confronting the church at that time" (*The Theology of the Westminster Confession*, p. 126).

The context of the Westminster Assembly, as we have seen was widespread false worship in the form of image and idol worship over a span of more than 1,000 years. More particularly, both the church in the East, and that in the West found theological/Biblical justifications for their practice. The East, with its icons, justified its practice by maintaining that they (the icons) were really an extension in history of the Incarnation (see Ouspensky's *Theology of the Icon*, p. 58). In the West, in a formulation particularly heinous to Calvin (*Institutes*, Book I, Chapter XII, p. 105), the Roman church "made a distinction between what is called *dulia* and *latria*;" the former was merely reverence or service

which was considered legitimate when offered to idols and images; the latter was reserved for the worship and adoration of God alone.

That the Westminster divines were affected by the spectre of Romanism is attested to by Leith (*Context of the Westminster Assembly*). He writes:

“Another factor in the theological context of the Assembly’s work was the presence of Roman Catholicism on the continent. Baille’s letters express the same concern about the fate of Protestantism, the Wars of Religion, and the role of Roman Catholicism that men in the 20th century have known in the face of national socialism, communism, and the spread of alien faiths.... Baille’s letters indicate that Roman Catholicism was very much in the minds of at least some of the members of the Assembly” (p. 42).

With the theological gymnastics and practical abuses of the Roman church in view, it is not unreasonable to suppose that the Westminster divines were eager to do away with any representations of God entirely, and that such a desire effected their exegesis of the second commandment.

In any event, it is clear that pictures of Christ for whatever purposes—worship or instruction or “ornamentation”—were clearly prohibited by L.C. 109. It is now for us to consider Exodus 20:4-6, for the purpose of determining what it prohibits, and what it allows.

II. Consideration of Exodus 20:4-6—concluding that L. C. 109 goes beyond Scripture in forbidding all uses of pictures of Christ.

The outline of this section follows:

- A. Translation of Exodus 20:4-6.
- B. Exegesis of Exodus 20:4-6.
- C. The Question of Pictures of Christ.
- D. Conclusion.

A. Translation of Exodus 20:4-6.

The question handed to the synod is an issue because of the second commandment of the Decalog, and the interpretation thereof by the Westminster fathers. Obviously, a judgment upon their accuracy depends upon what the commandment says and teaches. What it says calls for translation. What it teaches calls for exegesis. The exegesis will be presented in the following section. The committee offers to the synod this translation of the Exodus text:

“You shall not make for yourself a shaped idol of anything that is in the sky, on the earth, or in its waters; you shall not bow down to worship them nor be made to serve the, because 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 thousands who love me and keep my commandments.”

Explanation:

The first verb (*zasah*), translated “make”, pertains to a manufacture or a formation of an object rather than a mere two-dimensional sketch. The general use of the Hebrew word indicates this. But also its object in

this first sentence of the commandment, graven image or idol (pesel), leaves little doubt that the idea is manufacture. Thus we translate it “make.”

What we translate “a shapened idol of anything” is a paraphrase of the literal “an idol and any representation of anything.” “Shaped” pulls from the representation of any of the several heavenly, earthly, and aquatic forms mentioned next. The point is that the shapes of any of the several created items are in view. This is supported by the word we translate “idol” (pesel), which means “image.” We find the KJV interpreting this word as “graven image.” Such an idea of sculpture (Webster) is entirely fitting to the overall demands of the sentence. In fact, the verb form of (pesel) means “hew, hew into shape,” according to the BDB Lexicon. The carving of stone for construction and even the two tables of the Law are cited. Deuteronomy 27:15 uses the word and adds: “the work of the craftsman’s hands.” And since this shaped image is always used to signify an object of or for worship, the word “idol,” with its religious connotations, is in the above paraphrase—a clarification of the text, we believe.

“In the sky” is a brief rendering of “heavens from above.” There is no compelling reason to limit this to celestial inanimate bodies as the literal rendering might suggest, especially when the verse takes us downward to the ground and its waters, where animals live. If animals are envisioned in the lower stratus of the creation, why not the upper too? So “sky” is fitting if the atmosphere does not fill the term to the exclusion of cosmic space and its moons, etc. “On the earth” is used instead of the literal “in the earth” so as to include animals other than the likes of moles. The preposition “in” probably means within the land regions. At any rate, not the sky, earth, and waters, but the inhabitants of the sky, earth, and waters are in view. The stress on the preposition “in” forces that conclusion.

We put a semicolon after these phrases and not a period because of a belief that the next section explains the first and is not drifting toward independence from the first.

“Bow down to worship” is used for two reasons. (1) The literal is “prostrate yourself to them.” We feel that this itself is honor or worship, especially since, (2) the next verb, “nor serve them,” has the same root as in Exodus 20:2—“house of servitude.” The same root (ebed) is used in both places. Perhaps there is a third reason to attach worship as the principle idea to “bow down.” It is that the verbal “serve them” is in the passive form, translatable “nor be made to serve them.” Moses, by the Lord, knows that to worship an idol is the ultimate bondage. The commandment’s second verb here forbids bondage to a false god. If an idol worshipper suddenly realizes his bondage, the commandment is his prompter to rid himself of not only the bondage but also such abominable practices as idol worship in the first place. To fail to translate the second verb “serve” (as in verse 2) is to remove the reader another step from the double impact of the word: no false worship (first

verb) and no bondage in false worship (second verb).

Finally, “jealous God” appendages the commandment and gives the commandment its force. There is no dispute to the translation of the word (qanna) as “jealous.”

There is one textual note of significance. The Deuteronomy text of the second commandment (Deut. 5:8-10) does not have the “and” (waw) connected with the universal “anything” (verse 4) as does the Exodus text. The question of whether one is right and the other may be wrong need not bother us since the (waw) can be explicative (“indeed”) as well as the conjunction (“and,” “or”). Dr. Geerhardus Vos prefers the conjunction approach and translates “not make ... graven image, (and), as to the likeness of anything.” This is laden with problems. First, it tends to separate “graven image” from “likeness,” which disrupts the continuity of the commandment. Second, it raises suspicion that Exodus has an unwarranted scribal scribble, or Deuteronomy the lack thereof. But if, as Kyle and Delitzsch, the (vaw) in Exodus is explicative, it thus has the force of “indeed.” Then the commandment has a generic oneness and the Deuteronomic version is not much different in sense, in spite of its being short a (vaw).

In concluding this section on the translation, we would place our suggested translation beside the translation of the KJV, the ASV, and the NIV.

<i>KJV</i>	<i>ASV</i>	<i>NIV</i>	<i>Committee</i>
<i>Thou shalt not make unto thee any graven image or any likeness of any thing that is in heaven above, or that is in the earth beneath, or that is in the water under the earth.</i>	<i>You shall not make for yourself an idol, or any likeness of what is in heaven above or on the earth beneath or in the water under the earth.</i>	<i>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.</i>	<i>You shall not make for yourself a shaped idol of anything that is in heaven above or on the earth beneath or in its waters;</i>
<i>Thou shalt not bow down thyself to them, nor serve them...</i>	<i>You shall not worship them or serve them...</i>	<i>You shall not bow down to them or worship them;...</i>	<i>You shall not bow down to worship them nor be made to serve them,...</i>

B. Exegesis of Exodus 20:4-5.

The reason which the LORD gave for observing this commandment is found in verse 5:

“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 thousands who love me and keep my commandments.”

In commenting on this passage, Dr. Vos suggests that the traditional

understanding of the reason for the prohibition is located in the spiritual, invisible character of God. He writes: "The traditional exegesis of the second commandment is wont to find the reason in the spiritual (non-corporeal) nature of God, which causes every bodily representation to be a misrepresentation. . . ." (*Biblical Theology*, p. 152). This is the position which John Calvin brought forward, who found in the manufacture and use of images an offense to the majesty of God. We quote again, the passage from the *Institutes*:

"The majesty of God is defiled by an absurd and indecorous fiction, when he who is incorporeal is assimilated to corporeal matter; he who is invisible to a visible image; he who is a spirit to an inanimate object; and he who fills all space to a bit of paltry wood, or stone, or gold.... Hence, it is manifest, that whatever statues are set up or pictures painted to represent God, are utterly displeasing to him, as a kind of insult to his majesty" (*Institutes* I, XI, pp. 91-92).

Vos goes on to say:

"While acknowledging the truth of this idea in itself, we cannot be satisfied with it as a satisfactory exegesis of the second word. On such a view of the motivation the appendix ought to read, 'For I, Jehovah thy God, have no body.' Instead of this it is the jealousy that is warningly referred to ...And the word "jealousy," Vos points out, means "conjugal zeal, "jealousy in the married relation" (*Biblical Theology*, p. 152).

We should like to emphasize the fact that the reason attached to the second commandment, then, is that God has entered into a special relationship with His People Israel, a covenant relationship in which God has taken Israel to Himself as His wife (Hos. 1:2, 2:16, 5:4, 9:1, 9:10; Ezek. 16:1-8); which relationship is echoed in the New Testament teaching that Christ has taken the Church, the New Israel, to Himself as His Bride (Eph. 5:25-32; Luke 4:34-5; John 3:29; Rev. 18:23).

In locating the reason for obeying the second commandment in the covenant relationship between God and His People, we are only referring the "jealousy" mentioned in this commandment back to the Prologue of the Decalog. For the Prologue (Exodus 20:2) identifies the giver of the commandments as the sovereign God who takes the initiative with Israel in revealing Himself to her, and redeeming her from bondage. So verse 2:

"I am the LORD your God, who brought you out of Egypt, out of the land of slavery."

The covenant Name, "LORD," by which God had revealed Himself to Moses (Ex. 3:14-15) is given, and at the same time, God reminds the people of Israel of the deliverance out of the land of slavery which He effected in their behalf (Ex. 3:8).

The Sovereign God has revealed Himself to His people, and expects them to heed His Word, His revelation of Himself. The making of idols is a denial of the sufficiency of God's self disclosure by His Word. The idol is constructed in an effort to make visible and therefore more believable the God who cannot be seen, can only be heard.

This was the problem when Moses remained on the mountain all those days and nights. The people hadn't heard the voice of God for some time. They couldn't see their leader. They wanted more evidence of the

presence of God. So they lobbied for the manufacture of the golden calf (Exodus 32) in an effort to convince themselves that God was as near to them as the idol they made. It is important to note, furthermore, that the golden calf was understood, by Aaron and the people, to be representative of the LORD God, and not some Egyptian deity (Ex. 32:4-5).

The sufficiency of God's Word, and the denial of the same through idolatry, is the theme of Moses's comments in the wilderness immediately prior to entering the promised land: it serves as an expansion on the text under consideration (Ex. 20:4-6), and we present it in full.

“What other nation is so great as to have their gods near them the way the LORD our God is near us whenever we pray to him? And what other nation is so great as to have such righteous decrees and laws as this body of laws I am setting before you today? Only be careful, and watch yourselves closely so that you do not forget the things your eyes have seen or let them slip from your heart as long as you live. Teach them to your children and to their children after them. Remember the day you stood before the LORD your God at Horeb, when he said to me, ‘Assemble the people before me to hear my words so that they may learn to revere me as long as they live in the land and may teach them to their children.’ You came near and stood at the foot of the mountain while it blazed with fire to the very heavens, with black clouds and deep darkness. Then the LORD spoke to you out of the fire. You heard the sound of the words but saw no form; there was only a voice. He declared to you to follow and then wrote them on two stone tablets. And the LORD directed me at that time to teach you the decrees and laws you are to follow in the land that you are crossing the Jordan to possess. You saw no form of any kind the day the LORD spoke to you at Horeb out of the fire. Therefore, watch yourselves very carefully, so that you do not become corrupt and make for yourselves an idol, an image of any shape, whether formed like a man or a woman, or like any animal on earth or any bird that flies in the air, or like any creature that moves along the ground or any fish in the water below. And when you look up to the sky and see the sun, the moon, and the stars—all the heavenly array—do not be enticed into bowing down to them and worshiping things the LORD your God has apportioned to all the nations under heaven. But as for you, the LORD took you and brought you out of the iron-smelting furnace, out of Egypt, to be the people of his inheritance, as you are now” (Deut. 4:7-20).

Moses began by speaking of the nearness of the LORD, continued by citing the sufficiency of God's Word, went on to warn the people to avoid the making of idols, all on the ground that God was their Covenant God who redeemed them, and made them to be uniquely His own possession and delight (Ex. 19:4-5; Deut. 7:7-8).

The sovereign God took the initiative in revealing Himself to His people, and since His Word is sufficient to assure Israel that God is with them, the making and use of idols constitutes a radical distrust of God and His Word, a distrust which warrants His jealous wrath. So God promises the idolator that He will punish “the children for the sin of the fathers to the third and fourth generations....”

It is not only the denial of the sufficiency of His Word which calls forth His wrath, however. God is sovereign in His redemption, which is of God's grace, unmerited by Israel, who were spared the Angel of Death only by virtue of the provision of God in the form of the passover lamb. Idolatry is an attack upon the sufficiency of God's redemption. It is so, because the idol maker is making his contribution to the worship of God;

he is adding to that which God has provided.

In a study paper on the topic, Michael G. Smith speaks to this point. Recognizing that God prohibited Israel from worshiping as the pagans did, he maintains the issue was

“the nature of the relationship of a sovereign covenant God who calls to himself a people and reveals himself to them on his own terms. Pagan religion consisted of anxious humans chasing after the gods, trying, in whatever ways possible, to gain their favor and achieve a measure of security. The God of Israel, on the other hand, called a people to himself and established a covenant with them in which their relationship of obedience to him was well defined. There was no need for Israel to find and capture God; God had found Israel.” (*Using Symbols of Jesus in the Church's Educational Materials*, p. 4).

The currying favor with God through “works” is a theme which runs throughout Scripture, but it is related to superfluous and therefore false worship in at least two striking instances. The first is the worship which King Saul would have offered to God, in lieu of total obedience. It was worship which God had not asked for, and so the prophet Samuel speaks:

“Does the LORD delight in burnt offerings and sacrifices as much as obeying the voice of the LORD? To obey is better than sacrifice, and to heed is better than the fat of rams. For rebellion is like the sin of divination, and arrogance like the evil of idolatry.” (1 Sam. 15:22-23).

Thus Saul’s “work” of arrogant worship is compared to idolatry.

The other instance of a close association between “works” and idolatry is found in Acts 17, where it is recorded that Paul “was greatly distressed to see that the city was full of idols” (v. 16). In imparting true knowledge about God to the Athenians, the apostle asserts:

“The God who made the world and everything in it is the Lord of heaven and earth and does not live in temples built with hands. And he is not served by human hands, as if he needed anything, because he himself gives all men life and breath and everything else.” (Acts 17:24-25)

Again, the arrogance of man seeking to do something to win God’s favor, (whose nature it is to give everything to man), is closely associated with the making of idols.

We have mentioned that idolatry denies the sufficiency of both the revelation and the redemption of the sovereign, covenant God of Israel. There is yet another way in which idolatry calls into question the sovereignty of God.

Idolatry undermines the sovereignty of God by seeking to control God, to manipulate Him to gain power over God. Calvin says in this connection,

“As soon as a visible form is given to God, his power also is supposed to be annexed to it.... It makes no difference whether they worship the idol simply or God in the idol; it is always idolatry..... (*Institutes*, I, XI, p. 98).

Geerhardus Vos also finds in idolatry an effort on the part of man to control God. Vos begins by noting that “there must be a special reason why the making or worship of images awakens the jealousy of Jehovah”

(*Biblical Theology*, p. 152). He then goes on to find the reason in the magical character of idolatry. He asserts:

“Magic is that paganistic reversal of the process of religion, in which man, instead of letting himself be used by God for the divine purpose, drags down his god to the level of a tool, which he uses for his own selfish purpose. Thus the magically manipulated image will inevitably tend to become a second god by the side of the original one” (Ibid., p. 153).

In concluding this section, we note that the primary reason for the prohibition against idolatry is found in the character of the sovereign God of Israel and the covenant relationship which He established with her as His bride. So God warns that idolatry will provoke Him to jealousy.

Idolatry attacks this covenantal relationship by denying the sufficiency of God's self-revelation. The promise by God to reward those who “keep my commandments” underscores the necessity to take God's Word seriously. Idolatry, by contrast, distrusts God's Word, faults it for not providing sufficient evidence of God's loving presence.

Idolatry attacks this covenant relationship by denying the completeness of God's redemption. When God said, “You shall not make a shaped idol,” He was implying that man's propensity to seek access in worship to God through his own efforts is hateful to God: man is not saved by his own efforts in worship or in anything else; he is saved by grace.

Idolatry attacks this covenantal relationship, finally, by denying the sovereign control of God's rule over His people. “Shaped idols,” whether of something in the sky, or on earth, or in the seas, seek to localize the power of God, and therefore control and domesticate Him.

In all of these ways, the honor of the sovereign God is undermined; idolatry becomes adultery*, and God is jealous.

In this section, we have developed at some length the idea that the Second Commandment prohibits idolatry primarily because it undermines the honor of the sovereign, covenant-keeping God of Israel.

Now, more briefly, we will touch on other facets of the Second Commandment which bear on the issue of the legitimacy of pictorial representations of Christ.

The commandment itself, in contrast to the reason for the commandment, speaks of “making shaped idols,” which are in the form of created things, for the purpose of worshiping God.

The phrase, “making of shaped idols,” clearly has three-dimensional objects in view. The people of Israel were not to cast or carve anything which would be used as idols. There is nothing here about not making pictures or portraits.

The next aspect of the Second Commandment which needs comment is the designation of the forms prohibited. No shaped idol was to be made of anything created, whether animate or inanimate. Nothing in all creation, nothing “that is in the sky, on the earth, or in the waters,” is to be

*See: Hosea 9:1-10; Ezekiel 16:8, 15-19; Psalm 106:36-39; Judges 2:11-17.

used as a model for fashioning an idol. Again, pictures are simply not in view.

The aspect of the commandment dealing with the function of the idol remains to be considered. “You shall not bow down to them to worship them nor be made to serve them,” states the purpose for which the idol is cast or carved in the first place-worship. Therefore, there is no prohibition against the making of any created forms per se; indeed God commanded Moses to fashion a bronze serpent (Num. 21:8). It was only when the people began to worship the serpent that God ordered it to be destroyed (2 Kings 18:4). The phrase, “you shall not bow down to worship them,” indicates that shaped objects may not be made in order to be worshiped, or in order to worship God through them; the phrase does not preclude making such objects to be used in worship, as long as they are not worshiped. In this regard, God commanded Moses to fashion objects depicting creatures which were to be used in worship, when He commanded Moses to make cherubim at the ends of the atonement cover (Ex. 25:18).

When the above considerations are applied to the question of pictures, it is seen that:

- (1) the commandment does not prohibit the making of pictures
- (2) the commandment does not prohibit making shaped objects as such, nor even the making of shaped objects of created things to be used in the context of worship
- (3) the commandment does prohibit making shaped objects for the purpose of worshipping them, or worshipping God through them

Therefore, L.C. 109 is not justified in forbidding “the making any representation of God, of all or of any of the three persons, either inwardly in our mind, or outwardly in any kind of image or likeness of any creature whatsoever.”

At least, such prohibitions as are mentioned in L.C. 109 are not to be derived from the Second Commandment. Now it remains to discuss other grounds upon which the prohibitions might be based.

The Question of Pictures of Christ

In coming to terms with this issue, we will rely rather largely on the insights expressed in a paper published by the Committee on Christian Education of the OPC entitled, “The Use of Pictorial Representation of Christ in the Work of Christian Education.”

“Quite evidently the issue as to pictorial representations of Christ is basically theological. It has been maintained that such representations are simply and explicitly forbidden in the second commandment. To make a likeness of the Son of God in his human nature is held to be as fully a transgression of this commandment as the making of a likeness of the first person of the Trinity. On the other hand, it is argued, also on theological grounds, that the full and true humanity of our Lord justified such pictorial representations. Indeed, it is argued that the doctrine of incarnation demands such representations in our pedagogy, since without them it is alleged that a certain nebulous unreality must attach to our concept of Christ's humanity (*UPR*, p. 1.)”

The ground (here mentioned) for precluding portraits of Christ is that pictorial representations of Christ are “simply and explicitly forbidden by the second commandment.” But we have seen from our study of Exodus 20:4-6 that what is simply and explicitly forbidden is the making of shaped idols.

Other grounds, however, have been elicited in support of the position that portraits of Christ are forbidden by Scripture. We have already alluded to the traditional grounds, held by Calvin and others (cf. Ursinus’s *Commentary on the Heidelberg Catechism*, p. 526), that the spirituality of God precludes material representation. And we noted in that connection that G. Vos did not find such a teaching in the Second Commandment. Now, we must go on to point out that the incarnation itself disallows the traditional argument against portraiture of Christ, for the Scriptures tell us that in Christ “all the fulness of the Godhead dwells bodily” (Col. 2:9), and “the Word became flesh and dwelt among us” (John 1:14). The invisible God became visible; the spiritual Second Person of the Trinity took on a material human nature.

Another argument against portraiture of Christ is based on the idea that all such representations of Christ are necessarily limited to depicting His human nature, failing to do justice to the fact that the Second Person of the Trinity has both a human *and* a divine nature. But surely this line of reasoning fails to recognize the teaching of Scripture that God appeared in human form when He walked the earth, and that is what the people of Jesus’s day saw—a man. Moreover, God was pleased to reveal to Peter and others that this man who lived among them was the Messiah, the Son of God—divine as well as human (Matt. 16:17). And so the apostle John testifies: “We have seen his glory, the glory of the one and only Son” (John 1:14), and again, Jesus said, “Anyone who has seen me has seen the Father” (John 14:9).

While none of these arguments appears to us to rule out making portraits of Christ, the understanding of the essence of idolatry gained in our study of the Exodus text seems to suggest grounds for caution, if not actual prohibition, regarding the making of portraits of Christ.

One of the facets of idolatry which we discovered to be heinous to God was its tendency to deny the sufficiency of God’s self-revelation. And it is at just this point that we find portraiture of Christ bordering on the idolatrous. For Scripture does not provide us with the details of the features, coloring, or stature of Jesus the Christ. Apparently, such details are not necessary for our salvation—either justification or sanctification. Any attempt, therefore, to render the features of Christ for the sake of saying: “This is what Jesus looked like”—goes beyond the legitimate scope of what Scripture finds necessary or helpful. Such undertakings deny the sufficiency of what God has been pleased to reveal of Himself to us through His Scripture.

Portraiture of Christ—the attempt to say, “This is what Jesus looked like,”—may be precluded on the ground of another principle found in the Second Commandment. Portraiture of Christ may convey the idea

that Christ is specially present and localized in the portrait; this would be a violation of the principle that the sovereign rule of God is not to be dishonored by localizing, and therefore seeking to control, Him.

While portraiture of Christ thus defined is to be avoided, depictions of Christ whose primary function is to represent this or that episode in the life of Christ are permissible. They do not constitute a violation of the Second Commandment, and are in accordance with the Biblical teaching regarding the incarnation.

Moreover, since the Biblical teaching on the incarnation insists upon taking seriously the full humanity of Christ, pictures of the episodes of Christ's life are not only permissible but desirable. To fail to represent Christ while representing the disciples would present only a Docetic view of Christ, a denial of His true humanity. To fail to represent disciples and Christ in pictorial form would tend to convey the notion that the incarnation wasn't important enough to picture, or that non-verbal representation of the gospel and gospel history is not valid. But to take this position would require us to re-examine our use of such non-verbal symbols as the cross as we make use of them in our sanctuaries and homes.

D. What then do we conclude regarding the use of pictures of Christ?

(1) Contrary to L.C. 109, we do not find pictures of Christ prohibited by the Second Commandment.

(2) In regard to the Second Commandment, we do find Scripture urging caution in making portraits of Christ, that their purpose not be primarily to render a "likeness," to show what Christ looked like.

(3) That other pictures of Christ, depicting events from His earthly ministry, are permissible.

It remains for us to move on to some more pastoral considerations.

III. Considerations of pastoral approaches to the issues raised.

The outline of this section is:

- A. The validity of L.C. 109.
- B. The overstatement of L.C. 109.
- C. The use of pictures of Christ.
- D. The importance of imaging Christ.

A. The validity of L. C. 109.

The great strength of L.C. 109 is its focus on the transcendent majesty of God. In this emphasis, it does full justice to the main thrust of the Second Commandment, which has in view the honor of God, whose self-revelation is sufficient, whose redemption is complete, and whose sovereign claims are total—and all of this because He has chosen us to be His people out of the abundance of His grace. Therefore, believers today do well to cultivate that awe before God, without which true worship is not possible. The "regulative" principle, that we are to do only that which God positively enjoins in worship by His Word, remains a safe

guideline for public worship. Only then do we show respect for the sovereignty of God in the sphere of worship.

B. The overstatement of L. C. 109.

If you share with us the conviction that L.C. 109 goes beyond Scripture in forbidding “the making of any representation of God, of all or any of the three persons, either inwardly in our mind, or outwardly in any kind of image or likeness of any creature whatsoever,” then you may choose to seek to persuade synod to amend the Larger Catechism. However, it should be noted that our synod has taken the position regarding subscription to our doctrinal standards that “the second ordination vow assumes neither an *ipissima verba* (every word) subscription nor the absence of any reservations (doubts or questions) nor the absence of possible honest disagreements” (Minutes, 150th General Synod, p. 114). Therefore, you may choose simply to take exception to our standards in this instance (or continue to take exception, if such is the case).

C. The use of pictures of Christ.

Recognizing that caution in the making of portraits of Christ is indicated, what are we to say about the use of pictures? While permissible, are pictures of Christ to be encouraged? Yes. For one thing, God’s Word itself encourages the picturing of events. The description of Christ entering Jerusalem on “Palm Sunday” is but one of a great number of episodes in the life of our Lord on earth which call forth mental pictures. For another thing, pedagogy, particularly with children, calls for depicting events in the life of our Lord—if art has any place in the life of a Christian, should it not find expression in the sphere of that which is of great importance to the believer—the events of Jesus’s life and death and resurrection?

D. The importance of imaging Christ.

The only image of Himself which God initially established is a man himself (Gen. 1:26; 9:6). In the fulness of time, Christ came as our substitute, the True image of God, not only as a true man, perfectly obedient to God, but also as the man in whom “all the fulness of the Deity lives in bodily form” (Col. 2:9). So of Christ, Scripture says: “The Son is the radiance of God’s glory and the exact representation of his being” (Heb. 1:3). Or again, “He is the image of the invisible God” (Col. 1:15). Or once again, “The god of this age has blinded the minds of unbelievers, so that they cannot see the light of the gospel of the glory of Christ, who is the image of God” (2 Cor. 4:4).

Our calling as believers is to be conformed to the image of God’s Son (Rom. 3:29). We have been regenerated by God in order to be like Him (Eph. 4:24). We are those who have put on the new self, “which is being renewed in knowledge in the image of its Creator” (Col. 3:10). When the aged apostle John wrote to believers of loving each other, not only as an evidence that they love God (1 John 4:7), but as a way by which the un-

seen God gives evidence of His presence (I John 4:12), he concluded his epistle by issuing the negative side of the love command—“dear children, keep yourselves from idols” (I John 5:21). The most important thing for those of us who preach is not to conjure up word-pictures either of Christ, or the difference He has made in this life or that, but to image Christ in our lives among our people. Likewise, the most important task of the teacher is not to show Christ’s life in pictures, but to reflect Christ’s life in his or her own life. This is not to disparage the place of artistry in either preaching or teaching, but rather to focus on that highest calling, to which every believer is called. In the words of the apostle Paul: “And we, who with unveiled faces all reflect the Lord’s glory, are being transformed into his likeness with ever increasing glory, which comes from the Lord, who is the Spirit” (2 Cor. 3:18).

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RECOMMENDATION

1. That the 159th General Synod recognize that Exodus 20:4-6 does not forbid making and using pictures of Christ for purposes of instruction, if such pictures have as their chief interest depicting events in the incarnational life of Christ.

ACTION:

After considerable discussion and suggested amendments and substitutions, and even continuing such on Wednesday morning, the synod, on motion, referred the matter to a special committee to be appointed by the moderator, which will report back to this synod. The moderator announced the appointment of the following commissioners to this committee:

<i>George Smith (chairman)</i>	<i>John DeBardleben</i>
<i>David Clelland</i>	<i>Paul Alexander</i>
<i>James Hurley</i>	<i>Robert Reymond</i>

[Editor's Note: The special committee reported Wednesday afternoon. Recommendations and actions are reported here for convenience.

The Rev. George Smith presented the following:

RECOMMENDATIONS:

1. That synod receive the report with thanks and commend it to presbyteries and sessions for study.
2. That synod warn against the violation of the Second Commandment (Ex. 20:4-6 and Deut. 5:8-10) by the worship of visual depictions of Jesus Christ, while at the same time recognizing the legitimacy of usual depictions for other purposes, such as instruction or artistic expression.
3. That synod continue the study committee, requesting that it formulate appropriate revisions to L.C. 109 for consideration at the 160th General Synod.

ACTION:

Synod adopted the report of the committee with a change in No. 3, the last phrase reading as follows: "that it formulate appropriate revisions to L.C. 109 for consideration by the 161st General Synod."

The following, commissioners requested that their negative votes on items 2 and 3 be recorded: Ben Short, Tom Aicken, Dean Veinott, and Elwin Jewell. The following commissioners requested that their negative votes on all three items be recorded: Walter Menges and Charles Winkler.