33. Statues, icons and relics

Often heard: "The second commandment forbids graven images. Catholics bow down to statues."
Also heard: "If images are forbidden, why did God command the cherubim and the bronze serpent?"

Images in worship break the commandment

HELD BY Reformed · Baptist

Using images in worship is idolatry. Bowing before statues breaks the commandment, and venerating relics is superstition.

VERSES CITED

Exod 20:4–5; Deut 4:15–19; 5:8–9; Lev 26:1; Isa 44:9–20; Acts 17:29; 1 John 5:21; 2 Kgs 18:4 (Hezekiah destroys the bronze serpent).

WHERE THE IDEA COMES FROM

Byzantine Iconoclasm (726/730–787 and 815–843); Karlstadt, *On the Removal of Images* (1522); images removed from Zurich churches (1524); Calvin, *Institutes* 1.11. Reformed, Anglican, Orthodox and most evangelical churches, Baptists included, number the ban on images as a separate commandment; Catholics and Lutherans follow Augustine's numbering, which joins it to the first.

Sacred images and relics may be venerated

HELD BY Catholic · Orthodox icons, not statues

The commandment forbids making idols to worship. God Himself commanded images for His sanctuary (the cherubim, embroidered curtains, the bronze serpent), and in the Incarnation the invisible God became visible, so He can be depicted. Honor given to an image passes to the person it represents. Scripture also records God working miracles through relics.

VERSES CITED

Exod 25:18–22; 26:1; Num 21:8–9; John 3:14; 1 Kgs 6:23–35; 7:23–29; Col 1:15; 2 Kgs 13:21 (Elisha's bones); Acts 5:15; 19:11–12; Matt 9:20–22; Josh 7:6.

EARLY CHURCH AND HISTORY

Wall paintings in the Dura-Europos house church (c. 235) and catacomb art (2nd–3rd centuries). *Martyrdom of Polycarp* 18 (c. 155): his bones gathered as more precious than jewels. Basil, *On the Holy Spirit* 18.45: honor to the image passes to the prototype. John of Damascus, *On the Divine Images* (c. 730). Second Council of Nicaea (787).

CATECHISM AND COUNCILS

CCC 1159–1162, 1674, 2129–2132.

Images for remembrance, never for veneration

HELD BY Lutheran | Anglican practice varies | Methodist

The commandment forbids images made to be worshipped, not every image: Moses' bronze serpent stood until Israel worshipped it, and Joshua and Samuel set up stones of witness. Pictures of Christ and the saints, such as the crucifix, may therefore be kept in churches and homes for remembrance, teaching and witness, but neither images nor relics are to be venerated, adored or invoked, and relics bring no indulgence or forgiveness.

VERSES CITED

Exod 20:3-5; Lev 26:1; Deut 4:15-16; Num 21:8-9; 2 Kgs 18:4; Josh 22:21-29; 24:26; 1 Sam 7:12; Matt 22:19-21; 1 Cor 8:4.

WHERE THE IDEA COMES FROM

While Luther was at the Wartburg (1521-22), Karlstadt led a movement in Wittenberg to do away with images; Luther returned to preach against the destruction and answered him in Against the Heavenly Prophets (1525), calling images kept for memorial and witness "praiseworthy and honorable." The English Article XXII (1563) and Wesley's Methodist Article XIV (1784) reject the "Romish" doctrine of worshipping and adoring images and relics rather than religious art as such.

CONFESSIONS AND DOCUMENTS

Luther, Against the Heavenly Prophets in the Matter of Images and Sacraments (1525), Part I (LW 40); Apology of the Augsburg Confession XXI.34; Smalcald Articles II.2.22-23; Thirty-Nine Articles XXII; Methodist Articles of Religion XIV.

Across the traditions

How each major tradition answers this question, in its own words and from its own documents.

Catholic

Catholics hold that the commandment forbids making idols to worship, not every sacred image: God commanded the cherubim and the bronze serpent, the Incarnation made the invisible God visible, and honor shown to an image passes to the person it represents. The full case is set out above.

Sources: CCC 1159–1162, 2129–2132; Second Council of Nicaea (787), Definition.

Orthodox

The Second Council of Nicaea (787) gave images honorable veneration, not the true worship (latreia) that belongs to the divine nature alone, since the honor paid to an image passes to the one it represents; its canon 7 required relics in every consecrated church. Philaret's Catechism says honoring icons does not break the second commandment. The restoration of icons in 843 is kept on the first Sunday of Lent as the Sunday of Orthodoxy. Icons, not statues, are the Eastern norm.

Sources: Second Council of Nicaea (787), Definition and canon 7 (NPNF2 vol. 14, New Advent); Longer Catechism of St. Philaret, Q 518–522 (second commandment, icons), Q 267 (saints working through relics); Orthodox Church in America, Lives of the Saints, Sunday of Orthodoxy (Theodora, 843).

Lutheran

Lutherans use the same commandment numbering as Catholics: the Small Catechism's first commandment is "Thou shalt have no other gods," with no separate ban on images. Against Karlstadt's iconoclasm Luther held that crucifixes and saints' images kept for remembrance and witness are not forbidden; the sin lies in worshipping them. The Apology faults the slide from invoking saints to worshipping images and statues, and the Smalcald Articles reject relics as a means of indulgence and forgiveness.

Sources: Luther, Small Catechism, Part I (Ten Commandments); Luther, *Against the Heavenly Prophets* (1525), LW 40:85–91; Apology of the Augsburg Confession XXI.34; Smalcald Articles II.2.22–23.

Reformed

Reformed churches number "Thou shalt not make unto thee any graven image" as a separate second commandment. The Heidelberg Catechism forbids any image of God and any image made to be worshipped or to serve God through, and rejects images in churches as books for the unlearned, since God teaches by the living preaching of his Word. The Westminster Larger Catechism forbids representing any person of the Trinity. Calvin calls painting and sculpture gifts of God, lawful for things visible to the eye.

Sources: Heidelberg Catechism Q 96–98; Westminster Larger Catechism Q 109; Calvin, *Institutes* 1.11.1, 1.11.5–7, 1.11.12.

Anglican

Article XXII rejects "the Romish Doctrine" concerning the worshipping and adoration of images and relics as grounded on no warrant of Scripture, and the Prayer Book Catechism numbers the ban on graven images as the second commandment. The Article targets worship given to images, not religious art as such. Practice varies widely: Evangelical parishes keep churches plain, while Anglo-Catholics use statues, icons and relics as aids to devotion.

Sources: Thirty-Nine Articles, Article XXII; Book of Common Prayer (1662), Catechism (Ten Commandments).

Methodist

Methodist Article of Religion XIV, Wesley's abridgement of Anglican Article XXII, calls the "Romish doctrine" on worshipping and adoring images and relics "a fond thing, vainly invented," grounded on no warrant of Scripture but repugnant to the Word of God. Methodists therefore do not venerate images or relics. The Article does not forbid religious art, and crosses and stained glass are common in Methodist churches, though worship centres on the Word and the sacraments.

Sources: Methodist Articles of Religion, Article XIV (United Methodist Church, Book of Discipline).

Baptist

Baptists and evangelicals hold that using images in worship breaks the second commandment and that venerating relics is superstition, pointing to Hezekiah's destruction of the bronze serpent once Israel worshipped it. The full case is set out above.

Sources: Exod 20:4–5; 2 Kgs 18:4; Calvin, *Institutes* 1.11.

Where it gets contested: Some early voices opposed images in churches: the Council of Elvira (c. 305, canon 36) and a letter of Epiphanius. Catholics read Elvira as a response to persecution and desecration, and note that images were already widespread.

See also: the paganism chapter

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