

Pictures of Christ

From John Calvin, *Institutes of the Christian Religion*, trans. Henry Beveridge, Book I, xxvi, 53-58, emphasis added; English updated.

Psalm 115:4-8 “Their idols *are* silver and gold, The work of men's hands. They have mouths, but they do not speak; Eyes they have, but they do not see; They have ears, but they do not hear; Noses they have, but they do not smell; They have hands, but they do not handle; Feet they have, but they do not walk; Nor do they mutter through their throat. Those who make them are like them; *So is* everyone who trusts in them.” (NKJ)

God forbids all images—statues and pictures of Christ or any of the persons of the Godhead. Every such image is sinful and insulting to God’s majesty.

4. . . . as the corruption of nature hurries away all mankind collectively and individually into this madness, the Spirit at length thunders forth a dreadful imprecation, “Those who make them are like them; so is everyone who trusts in them.” And it is to be observed, that the thing forbidden is likeness, whether sculptured or otherwise. This disposes of the frivolous precaution taken by the Greek [Orthodox] Church. They think they do admirably, because they have no sculptured shape of Deity, while **none go to greater lengths in the licentious use of pictures.**

The Lord, however, not only forbids any image of Himself to be erected by a statue, but to be formed by any artist whatever, because every such image is sinful and insulting to His majesty.

5. I am not ignorant, indeed, of the assertion, which is now more than trite, “that images are the books of the unlearned.” So said Gregory; but the Holy Spirit gives a very different decision; and had Gregory gotten his lesson in this matter in the Spirit’s school, he never would have spoken as he did.

For when Jeremiah declares that “a wooden idol is a worthless doctrine” (Jeremiah 10:8), and Habakkuk, “that the molten image” is “a teacher of lies,” the general doctrine to be inferred certainly is, that **everything respecting God which is learned from images is futile and false.**

If it is objected that the censure of the prophets is directed against those who perverted images to purposes of impious superstition, I admit it to be so; but I add (what must be obvious to all) that **the prophets utterly condemn** what the Papists hold to be an undoubted axiom, which is, **that images are substitutes for books.** For they contrast images with the true God, as if the two were of an opposite nature, and never could be made to agree. In the passages which I lately quoted, the conclusion drawn is, that seeing there is one true God whom the Jews worshipped, **visible shapes made for the purpose of representing Him are false and wicked fictions; and all, therefore, who have recourse to them for knowledge are miserably deceived.** In short, were it not true that all such knowledge is fallacious and spurious, the prophets would not condemn it in such general terms.

This at least I maintain, that **when we teach that all human attempts to give a visible shape to God are vanity and lies, we do nothing more than state verbatim what the prophets taught.**

The early church fathers condemned the use of pictures in churches.

6. Moreover, let Lactantius and Eusebius be read on this subject. These writers assume it as an indisputable fact, that all the beings whose images were erected were originally men. In like manner, Augustine distinctly declares, that it is unlawful not only to worship images, but to dedicate them. And in this he says no more than had been long before decreed by the Libertine Council, the thirty-sixth Canon of which is, **“There must be no pictures used in churches: Let nothing which is adored or worshipped be painted on walls.”**

Even pagan philosophers identified the idolatry of making images of God.

But the most memorable passage of all is that which Augustine quotes in another place from Varro, and in which he expressly concurs: — **“Those who first introduced images of the gods both took away fear and brought in error.”** Were this merely the saying of Varro, it might perhaps be of little weight, though it might well make us ashamed, that a heathen, groping as it were in darkness, should have attained to such a degree of light, as to see that corporeal images are unworthy of the majesty of God, and that, because they diminish reverential fear and encourage error. The sentiment itself bears witness that it was uttered with no less truth than shrewdness. But Augustine, while he borrows it from Varro, adduces it as conveying his own opinion. At the outset, indeed, he declares that **the first errors into which men fell concerning God did not originate with images, but increased with them, as if new fuel had been added.**

Afterwards, he explains how **the fear of God was thereby extinguished or impaired, His presence being brought into contempt by foolish, and childish, and absurd representations.**

[Have you ever seen the blue-eyed, blond-haired Jesus, the black Jesus, the Chinese Jesus, the Japanese Jesus, the plastic baby Jesus, and the effeminate Jesus? What falsehood and blasphemy these portraits convey!]

The truth of this latter remark I wish we did not so thoroughly experience. Whoever, therefore, is desirous of being instructed in the true knowledge of God must apply to some other teacher than images.

7. Let Papists, then, if they have any sense of shame, henceforth desist from the futile plea, that images are the books of the unlearned — a plea so plainly refuted by innumerable passages of Scripture. And yet were I to admit the plea, it would not be a valid defense of their peculiar idols. It is well known what kind of monsters they obtrude upon us as divine. For what are the pictures or statues to which they append the names of saints, but exhibitions of the most shameless luxury or obscenity? Were any one to dress himself after their model, he would deserve the pillory [to be exposed to ridicule and public scorn].

The virgins and male martyrs displayed in many churches' paintings are sensual and immodestly dressed.

Indeed, brothels exhibit their inmates more chastely and modestly dressed than churches do images intended to represent virgins. The dress of the martyrs is in no respect more becoming. Let Papists then have some little regard to decency in decking their idols, if they would give the least plausibility to the false allegation, that they are

books of some kind of sanctity [holiness]. But even then we shall answer, that **this is not the method in which the Christian people should be taught in sacred places.**

The medium is the message. God ordained instruction through the Word and sacraments, not through images!

Very different from these follies is the doctrine in which God would have them to be there instructed. **His injunction is, that the doctrine common to all should there be set forth by the preaching of the Word and the administration of the sacraments**—a doctrine to which little heed can be given by those whose eyes are carried back and forth gazing at idols.

And who are the unlearned people, whose rudeness admits of being taught by images only? Just those whom the Lord acknowledges for His disciples; those whom He honors with a revelation of His celestial philosophy, and desires to be trained in the saving mysteries of His kingdom.

I confess, indeed, as matters now are, there are many in the present day who possess such books (i.e., images). But, I ask, from where did this stupidity arise, but just because they are defrauded of the only doctrine which was fit to instruct them? **The simple reason why those who had the charge of churches resigned the office of teaching to idols was, because they themselves were dumb [illiterate and spiritually dead].**

The gospel is visibly portrayed through true preaching and the Lord's Supper, not through crucifixes and crosses.

Paul declares, that by the true preaching of the gospel Christ is portrayed and in a manner crucified before our eyes (Galatians 3:1). Of what use, then, were the erection in churches of so many **crosses of wood and stone, silver and gold**, if this doctrine were faithfully and honestly preached, which is, that Christ died that He might bear our curse upon the tree, that He might expiate our sins by the sacrifice of His body, wash them in His blood, and, in short, reconcile us to God the Father? **From this one doctrine the people would learn more than from a thousand crosses of wood and stone.**

As for crosses of gold and silver, it may be true that the avaricious [greedy] give their eyes and minds to them more eagerly than to any heavenly instructor. In regard to the origin of idols, the statement contained in the Book of Wisdom has been received with almost universal consent, namely, that they originated with those who bestowed this honor on the dead, from a superstitious regard to their memory. I admit that this perverse practice is of very high antiquity, and I deny not that it was a kind of torch by which the infatuated proneness of mankind to idolatry was kindled into a greater blaze. I do not, however, admit that it was the first origin of the practice.

The human mind is an idol factory.

That idols were in use before the prevalence of that ambitious consecration of the images of the dead, frequently adverted to by profane writers, is evident from the words of Moses (Genesis 31:19). When he relates that Rachel stole her father's images, he speaks of the use of idols as a common vice. Hence we may infer, that **the human mind is, so to speak, a perpetual forge of idols.** There was a kind of renewal of the world at the deluge [the Flood], but before many years elapse, men are forging gods at will.

There is reason to believe, that in the holy Patriarch's lifetime his grandchildren were given to idolatry: so that he must with his own eyes, not without the deepest grief, have seen the earth polluted with idols — that earth whose iniquities God had lately purged with so fearful a judgment.

For Joshua testifies (Josh. 24:2) that Torah and Nachor, even before the birth of Abraham, were the worshipers of false gods. The progeny of Shem having so speedily revolted, what are we to think of the posterity of Ham, who had been cursed long before in their father? Thus, indeed, it is.

The human mind, stuffed as it is with presumptuous rashness, dares to imagine a God suited to its own capacity; as it labors under dullness, no, is sunk in the grossest ignorance, it substitutes vanity and an empty phantom in the place of God.

Westminster Larger Catechism, Question 109. **What are the sins forbidden in the second commandment?** The sins forbidden in the second commandment are all devising, counselling, 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 them; all superstitious devices, corrupting the worship of God, adding to it, 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 pretense whatsoever; simony; sacrilege; all neglect, contempt, hindering, and opposing the worship and ordinances which God hath appointed.

“either inwardly in our mind, or outwardly”

John Calvin explains:

To these evils another is added. **The God whom man has thus conceived inwardly he attempts to embody outwardly. The mind, in this way, conceives the idol, and the hand gives it birth.**

That idolatry has its origin in the idea which men have, that God is not present with them unless His presence is carnally exhibited, appears from the example of the Israelites: “Up,” said they, “make us gods, which shall go before us; for as for this Moses, the man that brought us up out of the land of Egypt, we do not know what has become of him” (Exodus 32:23). They knew, indeed, that there was a God whose mighty power they had experienced in so many miracles, but they had no confidence of His being near to them, if they did not with their eyes behold a corporeal symbol of His presence, as an attestation to His actual government. They desired, therefore, to be assured by the image which went before them, that they were journeying under Divine guidance.

And daily experience shows, that the flesh is always restless until it has obtained some figment like itself, with which it may vainly solace itself as a representation of God. In consequence of this blind passion men have, almost in all ages since the world began, set up signs on which they imagined that God was visibly depicted to their eyes.

9. After such a figment is formed, adoration at once ensues: for when once men imagined that they beheld God in images, they also worshipped Him as being there. At length their eyes and minds becoming wholly engrossed by them, they began to grow more and more brutish, gazing and wondering as if some divinity were actually before them.

It hence appears that men do not fall away to the worship of images until they have imbibed some idea of a grosser description: not that they actually believe them to be gods, but that the power of divinity somehow or other resides in them.

Therefore, **whether it be God or a creature that is imaged, the moment you fall prostrate before it in veneration, you are so far fascinated by superstition.** For this reason, the Lord not only forbade the erection of statues to Himself, but also the consecration of titles and stones which might be set up for adoration. For the same reason, also, the second commandment has an additional part concerning adoration. For as soon as a visible form is given to God, His power also is supposed to be annexed to it.

So stupid are men, that wherever they figure God, there they fix Him, and by necessary consequence proceed to adore Him. It makes no difference whether they worship the idol simply, or God in the idol; it is always idolatry when divine honors are paid to an idol, be the color what it may.

- The spiritual darkness of those who make images -

And because God wills not to be worshipped superstitiously whatever is bestowed upon idols is so much robbed from Him. Let those attend to this who set about hunting for miserable pretexts in defense of the execrable idolatry in which for many past ages true religion has been buried and sunk. **It is said that the images are not accounted gods.** Nor were the Jews so utterly thoughtless as not to remember that there was a God whose hand led them out of Egypt before they made the calf. Indeed, Aaron saying, that these were the gods which had brought them out of Egypt, they implied, in no ambiguous terms, that they wished to retain God, their deliverer, provided they saw Him going before them in the calf.

Nor are the heathen to be deemed to have been so stupid as not to understand that God was something else than wood and stone. For they changed the images at pleasure, but always retained the same gods in their minds; besides, they daily consecrated new images without thinking they were making new gods.

Read the excuses which Augustine tells us were employed by the idolaters of his time, (August. in Psalm 113). **The vulgar, when accused, replied that they did not worship the visible object, but the Deity which dwelt in it invisibly.** Those, again, who had what he calls a more refined religion, said, that they neither worshipped the image, nor any inhabiting Deity, but by means of the corporeal image beheld a symbol of that which it was their duty to worship. What then?

All idolaters whether Jewish or Gentile, were actuated in the very way which has been described. Not contented with spiritual understanding, they thought that images would give them a surer and nearer impression. When once this preposterous representation of God was adopted, there was no limit until, deluded every now and then by new impostures, they came to think that God exerted His power in images.

Still the Jews were persuaded, that under such images they worshipped the eternal God, the one true Lord of heaven and earth; and the Gentiles, also, in worshipping their own false gods, supposed them to dwell in heaven. . . .

Not all pictures, sculptures, paintings, photographs, and images are sinful. Images of God are forbidden. The proper use is historical, to give a representation of events, not to teach falsehood about God or evoke lust and sinful passions.

12. I am not, however, so superstitious as to think that all visible representations of every kind are unlawful. But as sculpture and painting are gifts of God, what I insist for is, that both shall be used purely and lawfully—that gifts which the Lord has bestowed upon us, for His glory and our good, shall not be preposterously abused, no, shall not be perverted to our destruction.

We think it unlawful to give a visible shape to God, because God Himself has forbidden it, and because it cannot be done without, in some degree, tarnishing His glory. And lest any should think that we are singular in this opinion, those acquainted with the productions of sound divines will find that they have always disapproved of it. If it be unlawful to make any corporeal representation of God, still more unlawful must it be to worship such a representation instead of God, or to worship God in it.

The only things, therefore, which ought to be painted or sculptured, are things which can be presented to the eye; the majesty of God, which is far beyond the reach of any eye, must not be dishonored by unbecoming representations. Visible representations are of two classes, namely, historical, which give a representation of events, and pictorial, which merely exhibit bodily shapes and figures. The former are of some use for instruction or admonition. The latter, so far as I can see, are only fitted for amusement. And yet it is certain, that the latter are almost the only kind which have up until now been exhibited in churches. Hence we may infer, that the exhibition was not the result of judicious selection, but of a foolish and inconsiderate longing. I say nothing as to the improper and unbecoming form in which they are presented, or the lewd license in which sculptors and painters have here indulged (a point to which I alluded a little ago, supra, s. 7.) I only say, that though they were otherwise faultless, they could not be of any utility in teaching.

Should churches allow images of Christ or of historical events from Scripture?

13. But, without reference to the above distinction, let us here consider, whether it is expedient that churches should contain representations of any kind, whether of events or human forms.

For the first 500 years of Christianity, Christian churches did not allow such images or visuals. They only arose as the church later degenerated and was entering the spiritual Dark Ages.

First, then, if we attach any weight to the authority of the ancient Church, let us remember, that for five hundred years, during which religion was in a more prosperous condition, and a purer doctrine flourished, Christian churches were completely free from visible representations (see Preface, and Book 4, c. 9 s. 9.) Hence their first admission as an ornament to churches took place after the purity of the ministry had somewhat degenerated.

I will not dispute as to the rationality of the grounds on which the first introduction of them proceeded, but if you compare the two periods, you will find that the latter had greatly declined from the purity of the times when images were unknown. What then? Are we to suppose that those holy fathers, if they had judged the thing to be useful and salutary [beneficial], would have allowed the Church to be so long without it?

Undoubtedly, because they saw very little or no advantage, and the greatest danger in it, they rather rejected it intentionally and on rational grounds, than omitted it through ignorance or carelessness.

This is clearly attested by **Augustine** in these words, (Ep. 49. See also De Civit. Dei, lib 4 c. 31) “When images are thus placed aloft in seats of honor, to be beheld by those who are praying or sacrificing, though they have neither sense nor life, yet from appearing as if they had both, they affect weak minds just as if they lived and breathed,” etc.

And again, in another passage (in Psalm 112) he says, “The effect produced, and in a manner extorted, by the bodily shape, is, that the mind, being itself in a body, imagines that a body which is so like its own must be similarly affected,” etc.

A little farther on he says, “Images are more capable of giving a wrong bent to an unhappy soul, from having mouth, eyes, ears, and feet, than of correcting it, as they neither speak, nor see, nor hear, nor walk.”

This undoubtedly is the reason why [the apostle] **John** (1 John 5:21) enjoins us to beware, not only of the worship of idols, but also of idols themselves: “Little children, keep yourselves from idols. Amen.”

And from the fearful infatuation under which the world has up until now labored, almost to the entire destruction of piety, **we know too well from experience that the moment images appear in churches, idolatry has as it were raised its banner;** because the folly of manhood cannot moderate itself, but at once falls away to superstitious worship.

Even were the danger less imminent, still, when I consider the proper end for which churches are erected, it appears to me more unbecoming their sacredness than I well can tell, to admit any other images than those living symbols which the Lord has consecrated by His own word: I mean Baptism and the Lord’s Supper, with the other ceremonies. By these our eyes ought to be more steadily fixed, and more vividly impressed, than to require the aid of any images which the wit of man may devise.

Such, then, is the incomparable blessing of images—a blessing, the lack of which, if we believe the Papists, cannot possibly be compensated!

Calvin concluded that images are a curse, not a blessing to the Church. The only images that Christ has prescribed for His Church are the sacraments, the visual holy symbols of Baptism and the Lord’s Supper. Scripture alone is the standard for Christian churches. May we flee from manmade representations of Christ, as these are teachers of falsehood.

----- Further Reflection -----

2 Timothy 3:16-17 “**All Scripture** *is* given by inspiration of God, and *is profitable* for doctrine, for reproof, for correction, for instruction in righteousness, that the man of God may be **complete**, thoroughly equipped for every good work.” (emphasis added)

Calvin has argued that images of saints and martyrs—which would include statues, paintings, or images on a video screen—should not be used in a place of worship. With the exception of making an image of Christ, which is clearly forbidden, we acknowledge that a sketch, drawing, or illustration of other Biblical figures may be lawful in certain cases. However, even if such images are lawful, their profitableness is not so clear. Because images are dangerous in their propensity to distort truth and elicit idolatry, such drawings or illustrations, even if lawful, should only be used in a minimal way for historical teaching, as in a book of Bible history.

If images are truly of benefit to Christians, then we must ask ourselves, why didn't Matthew, Mark, Luke, John, Paul, or Peter include sketches, drawings, or other images of Jesus, the disciples, the apostles, or other Biblical figures in the New Testament? Why didn't Moses include drawings of the Patriarchs—Abraham, Isaac, and Jacob? Why are there no images of Moses, David, Solomon, Elijah, Elisha, Rahab, Ruth, or Esther?

God gave us His inspired, inerrant, infallible, all-sufficient Word through the words of Scripture, originally written in Hebrew and Greek, and He guaranteed its preservation through the ages. Obviously, God could have included pictures, drawings, and images in the Scriptures, but He did not. If God thought it profitable for us to know how these Biblical figures looked, the men of the old and new covenant eras surely were fully capable of producing such drawings, portraits, or images, and God could have preserved these images for all time, just as He has preserved the written words of Scripture. For whatever reason(s), God gave us His truth only through written words, through propositional truth, conveyed through language. God did not include any types of images in the Bible.

In the case of Renaissance-era paintings, even if not in a place of worship, Calvin notes above the immodesty and distorted presentation conveyed by many of these paintings. In the case of movies, most dramatic presentations take liberties with the Biblical narrative, adding to or taking away from what God taught in Scripture. Furthermore, instead of focusing on what God wants us to learn from the life, ministry, and doctrine of these Biblical figures, we may be distracted by their looks and voices, their clothing, the music, and the overall entertainment effect of television, movies, or theater.

Such movies and pictures take us away from God's Word. God said to live “by every *word* of God,” not by teachings conveyed through images (Matthew 4:4, Luke 4:4). Religious movies and images distract us from the real message of Scripture. They dumb down the message, passing over important doctrines found in the stories of Scripture. They magnify people and human conjectures over God's pure and sacred word. God ordained the reading and preaching of the Scriptures, not entertainment or the viewing of pictures and images, as the means of conveying His truth to mankind for all ages. Let us beware of any inventions that seek to improve upon God's revealed religion. God did not give us images, pictures, or drawings, so clearly God did not see them as profitable or needful for His children.