



From Your Pastor
A Study of the Shorter Catechism
“Worshiping and Imagining God”
Questions 49-52

WSC 49: Which is the second commandment? A. The second commandment is, Thou shalt not make unto thee any graven image, or any likeness of anything that is in heaven above, or that is in the earth beneath, or that is in the water under the earth: Thou shalt not bow down thyself to them, nor serve them: for I the Lord thy am a jealous God, visiting the iniquity of the fathers upon the children unto the third and fourth generation of them that hate me; and showing mercy unto thousands of them that love me, and keep my commandments. / **WSC 50: What is required in the second commandment?** A. The second commandment requireth the receiving, observing, and keeping pure and entire, all such religious worship and ordinances as God hath appointed in his word. / **WSC 51: What is forbidden in the second commandment?** A. The second commandment forbiddeth the worshipping of God by images, or any other way not appointed in his word. / **WSC 52: What are the reasons annexed to the second commandment?** A. The reasons annexed to the second commandment are, God's sovereignty over us, his propriety in us, and the zeal he hath to his own worship.

Memory Verses: *“You shall not make for yourself a carved image, or any likeness of anything that is in heaven above, or that is in the earth beneath, or that is in the water under the earth. You shall not bow down to them or serve them, for I the LORD your God am a jealous God, visiting the iniquity of the fathers on the children to the third and the fourth generation of those who hate me, but showing steadfast love to thousands of those who love me and keep my commandments”* (Exodus 20:4-6)

An Explanation: Worship the *true God truly* as He has revealed in *His truth*; this is the design and intent of the Second Commandment. God is sovereign king; we are His subjects—His Beloved possessions—His very children. In our redemption from slavery to evil and sin, the LORD sets us free to live as we were created to live, not only acknowledging God as the only and true sovereign King as He has revealed Himself, but also to worship Him as He is pleased to be worshipped as Lord and King. When we focus on the Second Commandment, we are seeking to think God's thoughts after Him as He has revealed Himself, *and* as He desires to be worshipped by us, strictly in submission to His most Holy Word. In summary, God tells us not only who He is, but how we are to worship Him. This is for His glory and our good.

Our sovereign Lord and King, our Great God and Savior, has created us with imaginations. As part of the work of His redemption, He desires to (re) capture our imaginations and make them submissive to His Word. In learning this submission of our imaginations, we learn true freedom to think and imagine as God imagines to a certain degree. God gives His people the Second Commandment because He knows that sin has affected every part of us and marred His good creation. Sin has caused our imaginations to run wild with vain pleasures, pitiful small dreams,

lusts, and idolatrous false worship. By nature, our imaginations are idol factories, as described well by our forefather John Calvin. Because of this, God only wants us to imagine Him according to His Word. What we imagine is what we will worship. If we worship what is in our own imaginations, we will commit serious idolatry. In our worship as God's people, the LORD desires for us not merely to avoid what He forbids, but to do and practice only what He teaches and commands. This is what we call the "Regulative Principle of Worship". We must take this very seriously as God's people.

God desires us to be people of His Word. The Psalms are God's merciful and gracious cure for our idolatry, as well as an inspired songbook to capture our imaginations for the worship of God. We are not to make images of God; we are not to worship God through images (Exodus 20:4-6). Yet God graciously reveals Himself through His word *using images* such as metaphors and similes, describing God truly in word-pictures as Shepherd (Psalm 23), King (Psalm 10:16), Friend (Isaiah 41:8), Bridegroom (Isaiah 61:10); God reveals Himself using anthropomorphisms (*God revealing Himself in the form of man*, having hands, mouth, etc.: Psalm 89:13, 2 Chron. 36:12), and anthropopathisms (*God revealing Himself with man's emotions*, like grieving, regretting, jealousy, anger: Genesis 6:6; 1 Samuel 15:11, 29; Isaiah 63:10; Exodus 34:14); God reveals Himself through types and shadows in the Old Covenant (such as sacrifices, priests, prophets, kings, temples, feasts, etc.), and God reveals Himself in man himself, God's true image-bearer (Genesis 1:26-27; 9:6; 1 Corinthians 15:49; Colossians 3:10). What is God like? He is revealed and reflected in man, the creature designed to worship God alone! What is God like? He is revealed and reflected most fully in Christ, the Perfect Man, the True Image of God, the One who teaches us to worship God alone, in spirit and truth (2 Corinthians 4:4; Colossians 1:15; cf. John 4:24).

In our worship, God has mercifully granted us images of the Living God and His true revelation in Christ to us primarily through the Means of Grace: Word and Sacraments. God has accommodated Himself to us so that we will not be over-tempted to climb up irreverently to gaze into the mysterious and glorious Godhead that is secret and not revealed to us, nor to depict God in a way that would displease Him. Rather, He comes down to us in His gracious accommodation, so that we might know the things He has revealed to us. What is God like? *Let us hear*. What is God like? *Let us see, feel, smell, and taste through water, bread, and wine*. These are sacramental images that please God, that are not to be worshipped, but that reveal the true and living God of our worship and joy! Let these capture our imaginations as God's people.

Let us take this teaching seriously and neither *make images* of God, nor *worship images* of God. Both these two aspects of the Second Commandment must be stressed. The Westminster Larger Catechism focuses our attention on the implications of this in Question 109: "The sins forbidden in the second commandment are ... *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*".¹ In other words,

when we think of God, we want to first and foremost imagine Him according to His Word. And He is wonderfully revealed to us as “Father”, “Shepherd”, “Lord”, “Master”, “Friend”, “Mother”, “Rock”, “Shield”, “Anchor”, “Counselor”, etc. We claim the Bible is necessary to truly know God, but can we also affirm that the Bible *is sufficient* for how God wants us to live? Is the Bible sufficient to depict God to our imaginations in order that we might truly know Him, and to know how He wants us to truly worship Him?

Even when going to the museum to observe and enjoy the latest Christian art exhibit on tour, or to visit an ancient cathedral with stained-glass windows with pictures of the Triune God, we should desire to be very careful and watchful of our sinful, idolatrous hearts. We can appreciate good art, recognizing God’s common grace through the beauty of a gifted artist. But we should also be thoughtful about how we can unintentionally cause ourselves and others to stumble with regard to God’s special grace in our imaginations and the worship of the true God. We don’t want to undervalue art, or to ban it altogether. But we do desire to be wise and to allow the Holy Spirit through His very clear commandments to inform our imaginations and consciences to be wise and discerning concerning this important issue.² We must remember that the wise limits that God’s commandments teach to us, are for our further freedom to live as He intended us to live, and to love as He loves.

It is neither living nor loving for us to do something contrary to God’s commands.

Let our imaginations be saturated with Scripture and not with pictures or paintings of what we think God is like. It seems clear to me that pictures of God, or pictures of Jesus can never be pleasing to our Sovereign God in worship, nor is it right or wise even to make them because they can never fully reveal God in an orthodox way as He does so clearly and powerfully in His Word. What has been created and painted in history may be appreciated to some degree as art, and “what is done is done” as the saying goes, we cannot change what man has done in history with his gifts. But shall we continue the practice of creating paintings and pieces of art depicting God? Let’s think together about this as a church of this present age NOW. It seems to me that the best art would depict God in very human, common grace ways, such as a father loving his children, a couple embracing in covenant unity and love, a faithful shepherd, a caring mother, the majesty of a king, an anchored ship in the midst of a storm, a shield, etc. without seeking to depict God Himself or the Incarnation of God. Perhaps our great God has revealed to

¹ The full quotation in WLC, Q&A 109 is: "The sins forbidden in the second commandment are, all devising, counseling, commanding, using, and anywise approving, any religious worship not instated 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" (Q. 109).

² Bill Muehlenberg, [“Art and the Second Commandment”](#), Accessed 3/1/2018

us the best art subjects in the Psalms or as He has revealed Himself in a gentle and beautiful dove? Perhaps Rembrandt's best works of art were pictures of families for instance, and not depictions of God, and particularly of Jesus Christ?

How can you paint a picture of Jesus Christ who is one person with two natures, both God and man, that is accurate both aesthetically and theologically pleasing to God? Truth, Beauty, and Goodness are *not only given by God, but defined by God our Creator*. If all three are revealed *and defined* by God, should there ever be a tension between these three? Meditate upon this. According to God's revelation can something be truly beautiful, and not at the same time true and good by definition? I invite you to think hard about this. Beauty is not merely "in the eye of the beholder", it is defined by God, the One, Great, Sovereign Beholder of All Things! It is what He reveals. You might be able to depict artistically and faithfully what a first century Israelite male of Jesus' time might have looked like, but can you depict that He is one Person with two natures, both God and man in permanent, glorious hypostatic union? I think not; think about this. What is the definition of idolatry if not putting something untrue, un-beautiful, and un-good in the place of where God, and/or Jesus Christ should be? If one cannot faithfully and truthfully depict Jesus Christ, and has placed a rendition of a man designated "Jesus" in this place, is this not idolatry, even before the worship begins? As Pastor Brian Cosby put it helpfully, "*...Inserting an "invented" Christ in the place of the true revealed Christ in Scripture is idolatry*".³

According to the Second Commandment, idolatry is not just *when you worship*, but *when you make an image of God or Jesus Christ you intend, or potentially could, worship*. Think about it, prayerfully and carefully reading Exodus 20:4-6 again.⁴

At the end of our thoughts and meditation about this, let us worship the True God Truly as He has revealed in His truth; this is the design and intent of the Second Commandment.

Suggested questions to ask yourself for meditation and devoted prayer on God's Law (Psalm 1): How do you specifically see God and His character in questions 49-52? How do you specifically see Christ, and your need of Him today? What is your need of change right here, right now? Use the Shorter Catechism exposition of the Law to focus your sights on God, His glorious Christ, and your need of ongoing repentance and faith!

Prayer: Holy Father, you are my Sovereign Holy Lord and Father, keep me from idolatry. Forgive me for making images, and also at times being tempted to worship them by accessing you through them rather than Jesus Christ alone. Please teach me your will on this important

³ Brian Cosby, "[The Second Commandment, Westminster and Images of Jesus](#)", accessed 3/1/18.

⁴ Reformed Christians have not disagreed about the meaning of the 2nd Commandment, as they have its application to works of art. For further reading and pondering of this matter for yourself and your family, see Daniel R. Hyde's very helpful study, [In Living Color: Images of Christ and the Means of Grace](#) (Grandville, MI: Reformed Fellowship Inc., 2009); also several good shorter articles at [All of Grace](#), [Alliance of Confession Evangelicals](#), and some from the Orthodox Presbyterian Church website: https://www.opc.org/nh.html?article_id=438 / https://www.opc.org/qa.html?question_id=417

matter, of not only acknowledging you as the true God, but worshipping you truly as the true God in spirit and truth. Help my congregation to always be faithful in this as well, especially in our corporate worship service. Let it be worship strictly according to your Word! In Jesus' Name, Amen.

In Christ's love,

Pastor Biggs