

The Christian Life (7): The Second Commandment

The second commandment concerns the nature of our worship. God alone determines how man approaches Him. "As the First Commandment concerns the Object so this fixes the mode of religious worship" (Pink).¹

I. The Second Commandment

1. *Duties required.* "The Second Commandment requires the receiving, observing, and keeping pure and entire, all such religious worship and ordinances as God has appointed in His word."² This is implied in the prohibition, as when a negative is given the positive is implied. If we are forbidden to make and/or worship carved images, we are commanded to worship God as revealed in His word. "We are instructed by this commandment not to undertake what might seem good to us. And above all, when it is a matter of worshipping God, we are not to give any attention whatever to our imagination. But we are to follow in all simplicity what He has ordained by His Word, without adding anything to it at all" (Calvin).³ "The scope and meaning of this command is to bind all men to that solemn form of religious worship which God Himself in His word prescribes; that we serve Him not according to our fancies, but according to His own will" (Ussher).⁴ "The end, or design of this commandment is, that the true God, who in the first precept commanded that He alone should be worshipped, be worshipped under a proper form, or with such worship as it is right and proper that intelligent creatures should pay unto Him" (Ursinus).⁵

The second commandment requires the proper manner of worship. Each master wants to be served according to his dictates. It is neither a matter of indifference to God as to how we serve Him, nor ought we to be of the opinion that He will be pleased just so long as He is served, even if it is in a manner which is acceptable to us. No, He wishes to be worshipped in a manner pleasing to Him and which He has prescribed to us. He indeed takes note of the manner of service as carefully as the service itself. God is a Spirit and therefore He also wishes to be served in Spirit and in truth. He has therefore given us the second commandment in addition to the first commandment in order that we would not err in this, thereby decreeing the manner whereby we must worship Him.⁶

This is called the regulative principle of worship, which means public worship is regulated by Scripture. Simply put, we bring into public (formal) worship only what God has expressly commanded. God alone, through His word, determines the elements of public worship. "The acceptable way of worshipping the true God, is instituted by Himself, and so limited by His own revealed will, that He may not be worshipped according to the imagination and devices of men, nor the suggestions of Satan, under any visible representations, or any other way not prescribed in the Holy Scriptures."⁷ "I deny that any worship of God is legitimate, except that which is required according to His will"

¹ A.W. Pink, *The Ten Commandments*, 13

² Shorter Catechism, Q.50

³ John Calvin, *Sermon on the Ten Commandments*, 66

⁴ James Ussher, *A Body of Divinity*, 199

⁵ Zacharias Ursinus, *Commentary on the Heidelberg Catechism*, 517

⁶ Wilhelmus a Brakel, *The Christian's Reasonable Service*, 3:105

⁷ 2LBC, 22:1

(Calvin).⁸ "Divine revelation is the sole rule of divine religious worship" (Owen).⁹ "To worship God truly, is to worship Him in the manner which He Himself has prescribed in His word" (Ursinus).¹⁰ "It is a sin not only to worship false gods, but to worship the true God in a false way; and it is a duty also to worship Him rightly, according as He has appointed in His word" (Durham).¹¹ G.I. Williamson put it plainly, "What He commands is sufficient, and what He does not command is therefore forbidden."¹² Historically, distinction is made between elements and circumstances of worship. An element is a necessary part of worship, a circumstance is something that aides the elements. For example, lights, amplification, instruments, as well as the time and length of worship, are all circumstances. These vary from church to church and are regulated by the light of nature, Christian prudence, and the general principles of Scripture.¹³ Scripture and our Confession suggest five elements of NC worship: singing, praying, reading, preaching, and partaking of the sacraments.

The reading of the Scriptures, preaching, and hearing the Word of God, teaching and admonishing one another in psalms, hymns, and spiritual songs, singing with grace in our hearts to the Lord; as also the administration of baptism, and the Lord's supper, are all parts of religious worship of God, to be performed in obedience to Him, with understanding, faith, reverence, and godly fear; moreover, solemn humiliation, with fasting, and thanksgiving, upon special occasions, ought to be used in an holy and religious manner.¹⁴

(1) Singing. "Let the word of Christ dwell in your richly in all wisdom, teaching and admonishing one another in psalms and hymns and spiritual songs, singing with grace in your hearts to the Lord" (Col.3:16). First, the content of singing. By "psalms" are meant the OT Psalms, by "hymns" are meant short poems "composed for religious service, and sung in praise to God,"¹⁵ and by "spiritual songs" are meant songs "expressing spiritual thoughts and feelings."¹⁶ These three can be summarized as "the word of Christ," or that word that comes from Christ and concerns Christ. Second, the context of singing. The context of singing is the assembled people of God, "speaking to one another," "teaching and admonishing one another." "This singing has a horizontal and corporate focus to it" (O'Brien).¹⁷ The church sings together with one voice. "Oh come, let us sing to the LORD! Let us shout joyfully to the Rock of our salvation" (Ps.95:1). Third, the primary audience. Congregational singing is "to the Lord." It's singing offered to God as a spiritual sacrifice. Thus, "Lord" likely refers to Christ as the Head of the church. "To Him who loved the church and died for it—to Him, the Lord of all, who sends down that Spirit which fills the heart and prompts it to melody—such praise is to be rendered" (Eadie).¹⁸

(2) Praying. "Therefore I exhort first of all that supplications, prayers, intercessions, and giving of thanks be made for all men, for kings and all who are in authority, that we may lead a quiet and

⁸ John Calvin, *Tracts and Letters*, 3:263

⁹ John Owen, *Works*, 13:465

¹⁰ Zacharias Ursinus, *Commentary on the Heidelberg Catechism*, 517

¹¹ James Durham, *Practical Exposition of the Ten Commandments*, 93

¹² G.I. Williamson, *The Shorter Catechism*, 2:23

¹³ 2LBC, 1:6

¹⁴ 2LBC, 22:5

¹⁵ Albert Barnes, *Barnes Notes: Ephesians to Philemon*, 105

¹⁶ Charles Hodge, *Commentary on Ephesians*, 222

¹⁷ Peter O'Brien, *The Letter to the Ephesians*, 397

¹⁸ John Eadie, *A Commentary on the Greek Text of Paul's Letter to the Ephesians*, 403-404

peaceable life in all godliness and reverence...I desire therefore that the men pray everywhere, lifting up holy hands without wrath and doubting" (1Tim.2:1-2, 8). Corporate prayer was central to OT worship (1Kings 18:36; 2Chron.7:15; Isa.56:7). In the above two passages, Paul describes prayer as an element of NC worship. Consider the who, where, how, and why of public prayer. First, the who of public prayer. "I desire therefore that the men pray..." Men, either elders or other qualified men, were to lead the Church in congregational prayer. Women were to dress modestly (vv9-10) and remain silent (vv11-15). Secondly, the where of public prayer. "I desire therefore that the men pray everywhere (in every place)." This was in contrast to the OC, where corporate prayer was limited to the temple in Jerusalem (Jn.4:21). In fulfillment to Malachi 1:11, "In every place incense shall be offered in My name," prayer in worship will be offered "in every" local assembly. Thirdly, the how of public prayer. "I desire therefore that the men pray everywhere, lifting up holy hands, without wrath and doubting." "And these hands must be holy and pure; there must be purity of heart, and cleanness of hands, or a freedom from any governing sin, which renders prayer unacceptable unto God (Isa.1:15)" (Gill).¹⁹ Fourthly, the why of public prayer. "I exhort first of all that supplications, prayers, intercessions, and giving of thanks be made for all men, for kings and all who are in authority, that we may lead a quiet and peaceable life in all godliness and reverence." Prayer is to be made for "all men." That is, "all who are in authority." Prayer must be made for their salvation and/or restraint (vv3-4). By "supplications, prayers, intercessions, and giving of thanks," is meant, all kinds of prayers. It is for this reason what is commonly called the Lord's Prayer, uses plural pronouns: "Our Father...Give us...forgive us...lead us, etc" (Matt.6:9-13), as it's the perfect pattern for corporate and congregational prayer.

(3) Reading Scripture. "Till I come, give attention to reading, to exhortation, to doctrine" (1Tim.4:13). "I charge you by the Lord that this epistle be read to all the holy brethren" (1Thess.5:27). Reading Scripture was an essential part of OT worship (Deut.31:11). Thus, it was also central to synagogue worship. "For Moses has had throughout many generations those who preach him in every city, being read in the synagogues every Sabbath" (Acts 15:21; 13:27). Accordingly, the reading of Scripture became an element of NC worship. "Now when this epistle is read among you, see that it is read also in the church of the Laodiceans, and that you likewise read the epistle from Laodicea" (Col.4:16). Thus, Paul exhorts Timothy, "till I come, give attention to reading" (1Tim.4:13), that is, "the public reading of Scripture" (NASB).

(4) Preaching. "Preach the word! Be ready in season and out of season. Convince, rebuke, exhort, with all longsuffering and teaching" (2Tim.4:2). Preaching is central to public worship. "The sermon is the climax to our worship as we hear the living voice of God and are moved to give ourselves to Him in consecration and service" (Milne).²⁰ This high view of preaching was recovered at the Reformation. Pulpits became the dominant feature in Church buildings. "If the worship of the Medieval Roman Catholic Church was focused upon the altar and the sacrament of the mass, the worship of the Reformed churches was focused upon the pulpit" (Venema).²¹ There are at least two reasons for this high view of preaching: first, the faithful preaching of the word of God is the word of God. "Wherefore when this word of God is now preached in the church by preachers lawfully called, we believe

¹⁹ John Gill, *Exposition of Old and New Testaments Galatians to Revelation*, 284

²⁰ Bruce Milne, *Know the Truth*, 274

²¹ Cornelis Venema, *The Doctrine of Preaching in the Reformed Confessions*, *Mid-America Journal of Theology*, 1999, 135

that the very word of God is proclaimed and received by the faithful" (Bullinger).²² Christ speaks through His ministers. "Now then, we are ambassadors for Christ, as though God were pleading through us" (2Cor.5:20). Secondly, it's usually through the preaching of the word that sinners are saved and saints sanctified. "The Spirit of God makes the reading, but especially the preaching of the Word, an effectual means of convincing and converting sinners, and of building them up in holiness and comfort through faith unto salvation."²³

(5) Partaking of sacraments. Baptism and the Lord's Supper are ordinances of Christ, and thus elements of NC worship. First, the Lord's Supper. "They continued steadfastly in the apostles' doctrine and fellowship, in the breaking of bread, and in prayers" (Acts 2:42). "Now on the first day of the week, when the disciples came together to break bread" (Acts 20:7). Secondly, baptism. "Though baptism may be practiced outside the assembly of the church (Acts 8:36-38; 10:47-48; 16:33), as the ordinance by which an individual is visibly joined to the church it is certainly an appropriate part of the worship of the church" (Waldron).²⁴ "Both baptism and the Lord's Supper are grounded in explicit commands of Jesus Christ (Matt.28:19; Lk.22:19; 1Cor.11:24-25). Hence, Baptists have come to term them 'ordinances.' They can never be considered as optional in the Christian life; they are essential to discipleship (Matt.28:20; Rom.6:3-4) and lie at the very essence of the local church" (Haykin).²⁵

2. *Sins forbidden.* The second commandment forbids all unsanctioned worship, the worst of which is the worship of images. But this command not only forbids the worship of carved images as God, but also the use of carved images to aid our worship of God. "You shall not make for yourself a carved image—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 nor serve them" (Ex.20:4-5). "*What does He expressly forbid concerning images?* That we make no image to worship, and that we worship it not when it is made" (Ussher).²⁶ Thus, the second commandment forbids the use of all images in worship. This includes paintings, sculptures, and figures of God, angels, or saints. These are not to be worshiped as God nor used to assist our worship of God. Thus, the second commandment does not forbid the possession of all paintings and sculptures, provided neither are portrayed as images of God or used as aids in our worship or veneration of God. "Does God entirely forbid us to make any image? No, but He forbids us to make any image with which to represent God, or to worship Him" (Calvin).²⁷ "The question is not whether images may be made which ought to be valued by us (whether we regard the artist, material or antiquity, or even on account of the prototype, if he is a man of some reputation, dear to us). Rather the point is, no religious worship (whether called adoration or veneration) should be paid to images of God or the saints that are made by the hand of men" (Turretin).²⁸

That we may make clear it is sinful to worship God otherwise than He has commanded, it would be observed, there was a twofold idolatry found in Israel, and condemned in the Scripture. The *first* was when groves and images were planted and made to idols; and so the people of Israel did often to the heathen gods. The *second*

²² The Second Helvetic Confession (1566), Chapter 1

²³ The Baptist Catechism, Q.94

²⁴ Sam Waldron, *Unpublished notes on Doctrine of the Church*, 185

²⁵ Michael Haykin, *Amidst Us Our Beloved Stands*, 121

²⁶ James Ussher, *A Body of Divinity*, 199

²⁷ Calvin's Catechism (1545), Q.144

²⁸ Francis Turretin, *Institutes*, 2:50

was when they had groves and worshipped in high places, but not to idols, but to the Lord their God (2Chron.33:17). And so, in Deut.12:2-4, you will find two things forbidden. 1. The making of images to the false gods, which the Canaanites worshipped. 2. Making use of their manner of worship and turning it unto the true God. Both are forbidden; the first, by the first commandment; the last, by the second commandment.²⁹

Q. *What is God's will for us in the second commandment?* A. That we in no way make any image of God nor worship Him in any other way than He has commanded in His Word. Q. *May we then not make any image at all?* A. God can not and may not be visibly portrayed in any way. Although creatures may be portrayed, yet God forbids making or having such images if one's intention is to worship them or to serve God through them.³⁰

This is grossly violated by Roman Catholicism. "All Bishops are to teach the invocation of the saints, honor of relics, and use of images, and charge those who teach otherwise with thinking impiously."³¹ The Council of Trent then clarified: "Due honor and veneration are to be given to the images of Christ, of the Virgin Mother of God, and of the other saints, not that any divinity, or virtue, is believed to be in them, but because the honor which is shown them is referred to the prototypes which those images represent; in such wise that by the images which we kiss, and before which we uncover the head, and prostrate ourselves, we adore Christ; and we venerate the saints, whose similitude they bear."³² In other words, such images, icons, and relics are physical representations of things worshipped (Christ, Mary, and other saints), which is expressly forbidden and condemned by the second commandment. Trent then appealed to the Second Nicene Council (787) which contains the first appeal to the worship of images and icons. "We think the images of the glorious angels and saints ought to be adored. If anyone, however, is not so disposed, but labors and hesitates about the adoration of images worthy of veneration, the holy and venerable synod anathematizes him."³³ Charlemagne (Charles the Great) responded with a treatise (*Libri Carolini*) wherein he condemned the use of images/icons in worship "with Scripture and patristic quotations. The spirit and aim of the book is almost Protestant" (Schaff).³⁴ He also assembled a Council at Frankfort in the year 794 (representing the Church in France, Germany, and England), which "condemned the Second Nicene and enacted a severe decree against the worship of images" (Turretin).³⁵ "A Synod of Paris, held under the reign of Charlemagne's son and successor, Louis the Pious, in the year 825, renewed the protest of the Frankfort Synod against image-worship and the authority of the second council of Nicaea" (Schaff).³⁶

Those who today defend the use of images allege the support of the Second Council of Nicaea. However, there exists a book in refutation under the name of Charlemagne, in which are set forth the opinions of the bishops who participated in the Council and the proofs which they employed. John, the envoy of the Easterns, said: "God created man

²⁹ James Durham, *Practical Exposition of the Ten Commandments*, 93-94

³⁰ Heidelberg Catechism, Q, 96-97

³¹ Council of Trent, *Session 25*

³² Council of Trent, *Session 25*

³³ The Second Nicene Council, *Canon 7*

³⁴ Philip Schaff, *History of the Christian Church*, 4:467

³⁵ Francis Turretin, *Institutes*, 2:59

³⁶ Philip Schaff, *History of the Christian Church*, 4:469

in His image" (Gen.1:27), and from this he therefore concluded that we must have images. The same man thought that images were commended to us by this sentence: "Show me thy face, for it is beautiful" (Cant.2:14). Another, to prove that images ought to be set upon altars, cited this testimony: "No one lights a lantern and puts it under a bushel" (Matt.5:15). But pre-eminently ingenious is this interpretation: "As we have heard, so also have we seen" (1Jn.1:1). In short, so disgusting are their absurdities that I am ashamed even to mention them.³⁷

(1) Because God is spiritual. "Take careful heed to yourselves, for you saw no form when the LORD spoke to you at Horeb out of the midst of the fire, lest you act corruptly and make for yourselves a carved image in the form of any figure: the likeness of male or female, the likeness of any thing on earth, sea, or in heaven" (Deut.4:15-19). Because God is spiritual Moses saw no (physical) form when He revealed Himself out of the fire. Thus, it would be "corrupt" behavior for him to worship God with any carved image. "Professing to be wise, they became fools, and changed the glory of the incorruptible God into an image made like corruptible man—and birds and four-footed animals and creeping things" (Rom.1:22-23). "As God is a pure Spirit it is unreasonable to frame any image or picture of God. And, therefore when God had declared His nature and His works in a stately and majestic eloquence, He demands of the people, 'To whom then will you liken God? Or what likeness will you compare to Him?' (Isa.40:18). Where could they find anything that would be a lively image and resemblance of His infinite excellency? God is infinitely above any statue, and those that think to draw God by a stroke of pencil, or form Him by the engravings of art, are more stupid than the statues themselves" (Charnock).³⁸ "What madness is it to imagine that any configuration of matter bears a resemblance to a Being who has no bodily parts! Or, that a puny statue can convey an idea of Him whom the heaven and the earth cannot contain" (Dick).³⁹

(2) Because God is jealous. "For I, the LORD your God, am a jealous God, visiting the iniquity of the fathers upon the children to the third and fourth generations of those who hate Me, but showing mercy to thousands, to those who love Me and keep My commandments" (Ex.20:5-6). The phrase "visiting the iniquity of the fathers upon the children" refers to the generational consequences of idolatry and pagan worship. Though there are happy exceptions, children often follow in the steps of their parents. Parents who are idolatrous God-haters will likely raise idolatrous God-haters. And so, in this sense, the iniquity of fathers are punished in their children, as the children walk in the ways and practices of their fathers. "God never visits the iniquity of the fathers upon repenting and reformed children" (Hopkins).⁴⁰ "If the head of a family turns away from Yahweh to worship images, he will observe how disastrously such disobedience influences his posterity. His entire family is swallowed up in his self-willed religion. His sin becomes their stumbling. Yahweh takes extremely seriously the evil of serving idols and worshiping images" (Douma).⁴¹

He declares that He is a God, *who shows mercy unto thousands of them that love Him and keep His commandments*. By this promise, God would magnify His mercy, that so He might the more strongly invite us to obedience by a consideration of the greatness of His mercy and by the desire of our own salvation, and that of our children. And

³⁷ John Calvin, *Institutes*, 1.11.14

³⁸ Stephen Charnock, *Works*, 1:272

³⁹ John Dick, *Lectures on Theology*, 4:440

⁴⁰ Ezekiel Hopkins, *Works*, 1:341

⁴¹ J. Douma, *The Ten Commandments*, 57

whereas He threatened punishment only to the fourth generation, He here extends His mercy to thousands, that so He might declare that He is more inclined to show mercy than wrath, and in this way constrain us to love Him.⁴²

⁴² Zacharius Ursinus, *Commentary on the Heidelberg Catechism*, 535