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A. God cannot and may not be visibly portrayed in any way. Creatures may be portrayed, but God forbids us to make or have any images of them in order to worship them or to serve God through them.

**98. Q. But may images not be tolerated in the churches as "books for the laity"?**

A. No, for we should not be wiser than God. He wants His people to be taught not by means of dumb images but by the living preaching of His Word.

Isaiah 44:9-20 shows idolatry up as the foolishness that it is (read).

Notice that idolatry is a communal endeavor.

The ironsmith fashions the idol with hammers.

The carpenter shapes it into the figure of a man.

Idolatry doesn't look so bad because everyone's doing it.

So long as everyone is a part of it, it can't be all that bad, right?

Idolatry is always a communal effort.

It makes no difference what the idol is.

What do you think will deliver you?

That is the cry of the worshiper: “Deliver me, for you are my god!”

What is going to bring you peace and happiness?

What is going to allow you to master your destiny?

For some it is money—if only we made another \$10,000...

For others it is status—if only I had that job...

For many it is a spouse—if only I were married...

And children,

where is your heart set?

Getting a certain toy?

Getting the best grades?

Getting away with something you know is wrong?

No matter how individualistic we are,

idolatry is always a communal event.

If no one else valued what we value,

we might see our idolatry for what it is.

But when everyone else is pursuing the same sorts of idols,

it becomes normal, rational, and as Isaiah says (verses 18-20)

The basic question when dealing with sin (for idolatry is at the root of all sin) is this one:

“Is there not a lie in my right hand?”

What lie am I believing?

Sin claims to bring happiness—but it only brings misery.  
Why do you believe it?  
When was the last time that sin gave you what it promised?  
“A deluded heart has led him astray, and he cannot deliver himself.”

If the first commandment emphasizes the need for us to love the Lord our God,  
and to have no other God but God,  
the second commandment shows us our need to worship God in Spirit and in truth.

And we see this in Deuteronomy 4.

This is Moses' introduction to his sermon on the Ten Commandments (chapters 5-26).  
He warns the Israelites to “take care, and keep your soul diligently,  
lest you forget the things that your eyes have seen,  
and lest they depart from your heart all the days of your life.” (4:9)

Notice the focus on “the things that your eyes have seen.”

Forty years ago they were children when God delivered them from Egypt.  
As wide-eyed children, they crossed the Red Sea,  
marveling at the mighty power of God to save.  
They grew up eating manna in the wilderness,  
drinking water from the Rock.  
They had seen for themselves the greatness of God,  
as the Spirit of God led them through the wilderness in the pillar of cloud and fire.

God's works in history are central to the worship of God.

But so also is God's word.

Remember also how God spoke to you at Mt Sinai.

“You came near and stood at the foot of the mountain,  
while the mountain burned with fire to the heart of heaven,  
wrapped in darkness, cloud and gloom.  
Then the Lord spoke to you out of the midst of the fire.  
You heard the sound of words, but saw no form; there was only a voice.  
And he declared to you his covenant, which he commanded you to perform,  
that is, the Ten Commandments.”

Do not forget my works—do not forget my word.

And do not forget that you saw no form.

You cannot worship God by means of an image—  
whether the figure of a male or female, or that of an animal or any other creature.  
You cannot worship God through the sun, moon or stars.  
Do not confuse the Creator with the creature.

Why are images condemned so thoroughly?

Because no creature fully reflects God.

These creatures are things

“that the LORD your God has allotted to all the peoples under the whole heaven.”

Notice that there are two reasons given in Deuteronomy 4 for the prohibition of images.

1) because you saw no form at the mountain

2) because you heard a voice

There is no image at Mt Sinai—only the Word.

“You saw no form” therefore do not make any carved image.

And to make a carved image is to “forget the covenant of the LORD your God.”

You are to remember the Word of God and the works of God—  
what he has said, and what he has done.

But why was there no image at Mt. Sinai?

Every other god in the ancient near east had images.

A god without an image was unheard of!

Why was there no image at Mt. Sinai?

To understand this, we have to go back to Genesis 1.

Because God once had an image.

His name was Adam.

In Genesis 1:26, God said, “let us make man in our image.”

And so God created man in his own image and likeness.

“God created man, male and female, after his own image,

in knowledge, righteousness and holiness, with dominion over the creatures.”

Man’s knowledge reflected God’s infinite knowledge.

He was righteous and holy—as God is righteous and holy.

And as God rules over all things,

so man ruled over the creatures as the steward of God.

In the Garden of Eden, word and image came together.

God created man in his image, and he spoke to him his word.

Indeed, we are told that God walked in the garden with Adam,

suggesting that God took some kind of visible form.

But Adam was not content to remain the image of God, his Father.

And through his sin and rebellion, he exchanged the glory of the immortal God  
for the image of the serpent.

Adam had been created as the image of God.

He was created to look like God.

But now that image was twisted and distorted.

When you look at man today, you see a perversion of the image of God.

Our knowledge has been mixed with folly and ignorance,

so that our communication has become filled with half-truths.

Yes, we still do good things from time to time,  
but our 'righteousness' is mixed with wickedness.  
Is there any man on earth of whom you could say,  
"Ah, that's what God looks like!"?  
And what dominion we still have over the creatures  
is turned to manipulation and destruction.

No, when Israel comes to Mt. Sinai,  
there is no one and nothing that is worthy of being held up as the image of God.  
And so God speaks from the fire—  
a warning of the judgment that will come upon the earth  
The Word of God comes to Israel without an image—without a form.  
For Israel to make an image is to repeat the sin of Adam.  
And the warning is given to them and to their children (4:25-28).  
As he will say later in Dt. 27:15  
"Cursed be the man who makes a graven or molten image"  
But there is also a promise.  
God will remember his covenant.  
He will restore his people and bless them (4:29-31).

So the Second Commandment declares that you cannot use images in the true worship of God.  
God has spoken by his Word.  
To use images is to draw your eyes, your heart, and your mind  
away from what God has done in history.

Now the use of images was a regular problem for Israel.  
During the time of the judges (Ju. 17-18) as well as the kings (1 Kgs 14-15; 2 Kgs 17, 21)  
Israel frequently turned to the use of images in worship.

You can understand why.  
We *were* created in the image of God.  
We understand intuitively that there *should be* an image of God.  
But sin has so corrupted that image, that from Adam to Christ,  
there was no image worthy of God.

John's Gospel begins,  
"In the beginning was the Word, and the Word was with God, and the Word was God."  
"The Word became flesh and dwelt among us."

Paul speaks likewise in Colossians 1:15  
"He is the image of the invisible God,  
the firstborn of all creation...the firstborn from the dead."  
Jesus is the image of God in two respects.  
First, he is the image of God as the eternal Son of God.  
If Adam was created in the image of God as the Son of God,  
how much more is the eternal Son the true image of the Father,  
because the eternal Son resembles the Father in every way.

But second, he is the image of God because he is the firstborn from the dead.  
Because Jesus has been raised from the dead,  
man is restored to God's image.

Jesus Christ is the embodiment of Israel.  
He was exiled to Egypt as a child, and out of Egypt God called his Son.  
He wandered in the wilderness for 40 days (even as Israel for 40 years),  
He endured the temptations of Israel in the desert:  
    longing for bread,  
    taking the easy route,  
    idolatry/worshipping false gods,  
and where Israel had failed, Jesus succeeded.

As the Image of God,  
    Israel was to make all nations ooh, and ahh over their righteous laws.  
    That didn't happen very often!

As the Image of God,  
    Jesus declared, "when I am lifted up I will draw all men to myself"  
    And he has gathered the nations together in His Name.

In Jesus we see the true image of God.  
The Image is the Word.  
The Word is the Image.

What are the implications of this?

Paul says in Romans 8:29  
    that God predestined us "to be conformed to the image of his Son,  
    in order that he might be the firstborn among many brothers."  
God restores us to his image through conforming us to the image of Jesus.  
Likewise, in 1Cor 15:49, Paul says that  
    just as we have borne the image of the man of dust,  
    so also we shall bear the image of the man from heaven.  
Just as we have shared in Adam's sin and misery,  
    so also we share in the glory of the resurrected Christ.

The admonition to the Israelites in the wilderness is somewhat different for us.

We cannot say "you saw no form."  
No!  
Paul tells us that though the Son of God was in the form of God,  
    he took to himself the form of a servant.  
We have seen Jesus,  
    the one in whom the Word of God and the Works of God are united.  
He is the Image of God and the Word of God,  
    and through his Word we are being renewed after his Image.

So some might say that we could make pictures of Jesus –  
because he is both the Image and the Word.

But what can you craft that could depict this?

Any artistic depiction of this can only give us half of the story.  
The movie, “The Passion of the Christ,” gives a graphic portrayal  
of the sufferings of Jesus.

And it may have some educational value.

I know that it has driven many to read the scriptures,  
to find out who this Jesus was.

But an artistic depiction is only as powerful as the artist.

It can only give us a human Jesus.

It cannot give us the whole Jesus—the one who was God and man.

The incarnation *must* affect the way we read the Second Commandment.

But it does not change the Second Commandment.

God has come in the flesh.

The Word has been revealed in the flesh.

The Image of God has walked among us.

There is now an image through which we must worship God!

But that Image sits at the right hand of the Father.

And the only place on earth where you can catch a glimpse of that Image,  
is in the faces around you—

in those who are being conformed to likeness of Christ.

Therefore we must remember what God has done in Jesus Christ,

and we must teach them to our children, and our grandchildren.

We must teach them the Word of God and the works of God.

That is one of the reasons why we have the catechism quiz each week.

We are teaching our children what God has done in Jesus Christ.

The catechism is designed as a summary of basic biblical teaching.

I know that some of you have difficulty memorizing.

As we get older our brains get slower.

But when each child is baptized, we as a congregation promise to support and encourage  
the parents in training their children in the way of Christ.

One way you can do that is by learning the catechism with them.

Another way is simply to be present when they are quizzed.

Every child who grows up at MCC should have a thorough understanding of the catechism.

Our Sunday school classes are designed to do precisely what Dt 4 commands,

as our children study the scriptures to learn the story of redemption,  
including two years on study of the shorter catechism

to understand the basics of the faith.

And even the adults are not left out!

I plan on preaching a full catechetical series every few years  
in order to ensure that we all continue to grow in our understanding  
of the basic summary of biblical teaching.

We are called to remember what God has done, and what God has said.

In Jesus Christ we hear God's Word, and we behold God's Image.

Therefore let us worship him in Spirit and in truth,  
that we also might be conformed to the image of Christ through his Word.

## **LORD'S DAY 35**

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A. No, for we should not be wiser than God. He wants His people to be taught not by means of dumb images but by the living preaching of His Word.

Let us pray.

Almighty God, as we look into the face of your beloved Son, Jesus Christ our Lord, who is your true image, we beseech you, in whom is all fullness of wisdom and light, to guide us by your Word and Spirit that we might bear the fruits of righteousness to the glory and exaltation of your holy name. Amen.