

# Is It Wrong to Have PICTURES of Christ?

Here is an eye-opening article from one of our contributing editors in Great Britain. You will find it vitally interesting.

by Ernest Martin

SOME time ago a very popular book was published in which the writer advocated concentrating upon a small picture of Christ while you are praying in order to give you the proper inspiration.

Today, God seems so far off to most people that people think they must have some representation of Christ, the Father, or some saint in order to pray with reality. There are thousands of images, idols and pictures throughout the world — in homes, in Bibles, in churches — which are to remind people of Christ or some Biblical personage. Do we need such images? And should we use them?

## Are Images or Pictures Sanctioned by God?

The Bible expressly forbids the use of images in any form in the true worship of God.

Notice Exodus 20:4,5: "Thou shalt not make unto thee any graven image, or any likeness of any thing that is in heaven above [note, the command is against any likeness, no matter what form], 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."

This second command is primarily against the use of intermediate material images, idols or pictures with which to worship the true God mentioned in the first commandment. The worship of God must not be *through* images.

Most of you have already understood that the usage of images is wrong, but what about *pictures*? Does the second commandment specifically include them?

Yes, it does! Notice that it says no *likeness* shall be made of heavenly beings to be used in the worship of God. Likenesses are portrayed in pictures as well as through idols or other images. Pictures of Christ, then, are definitely forbidden.

## Israel Told to Destroy Images and Pictures of Heathen

To carry out the enforcement of God's second commandment, notice what God commanded the Israelites just before they entered the Promised Land: "Then ye shall drive out all the inhabitants of the land from before you, AND DESTROY ALL THEIR PICTURES, and destroy all their MOLTEN IMAGES, and quite pluck down all their high places" (Num. 33:52). Their pictures of heavenly things and their idols were considered one and the same. Idolatrous pictures and images are both forbidden by God. The Israelites were commanded to destroy them all.

Although the Israelites after moving into the Promised Land did not totally abolish these forms of idolatry, we find that the Jews, after the Babylonian captivity, about 450 B.C., did, in general, remove idolatrous worship from the land. They had been told by the prophets that their captivity was because of their idolatry and Sabbath breaking (Isa. 10:11; Neh. 13:18). And, after the captivity, the Rabbis made the Sabbath one of the main commandments. Also, they legislated laws which were designed to separate the Jew from all appearances of idolatry. In fact, by the time of our Saviour, the making of sculptures, or pictures was so unknown

among the Jews that Caligula, the Roman Emperor, had to employ Phoenicians to make a statue of him to be put in Jerusalem because no Jew knew how to make one (Edersheim, *Life and Times of Jesus the Messiah*, pp. 89, 90). This was the condition of the pious Jews regarding image- and picture-making during the time of Christ.

## Early Christians Forbade Images and Pictures

Not only did Jesus teach the commandments of God (Matt. 19:16-22), but His apostles also did (I John 2:3, 4). Therefore it is no wonder that those individuals converted by Christ and the apostles kept the commandments — including the second.

Dr. Farrar in his monumental book, *The Life of Christ as Represented in Art*, on pages 5 and 6 says that early Christians of all ranks regarded the painting or representation of Christ as profanity and an act of irreverence. There is ample evidence to show that they took the same stand as the Jews as far as art was concerned. They needed no images or pictures to remind them of Christ or the Father. Jesus had said that those who worship Him must do so "in spirit and in truth." The only mediator between man and the Father is Christ — there is no need of intermediate pictures or images.

This early abhorrence for images and pictures of the Father or Christ was so indelibly planted upon the minds of early Christians that for over 300 years after the death of the apostles, there was no official representation of deity made. It is true that a few heretical individuals

(undercover, not openly) had sketched outlines of Christ in various places (to be mentioned later), but the vast majority of professing Christians, Catholic or otherwise, refrained from portraying anything connected with God until about the fourth century.

#### Early Catholic Officials Denounce Imagery as Idolatrous

Here is an example of how early Catholics looked upon the use of images and pictures of Christ.

In the year 326 A.D., one of the great Catholic leaders, Eusebius of Caesarea, showed great distaste for the request for a picture of Christ from the sister of Emperor Constantine. She had requested a picture to see how Christ looked. Notice what Eusebius wrote back to her. "And since you have written about some supposed likeness or other of Christ, what and what kind of likeness of Christ is there? . . . *Such images are forbidden by the second commandment. They are not to be found in churches, and are forbidden among Christians alone*" (Farrar, p. 56). This is striking testimony that the Catholic Church at this time understood the laws of God on this matter. Farrar also records that Irenaeus, Clement, Origen and Lactantius, all of whom were high-ranking Catholic officials, sternly condemned their use in any fashion. And, Irenaeus and Clement distinctly appeal to the second commandment as authority (p. 60).

Later, there was another bishop of the fourth century, whom Catholic historians regard as one of the saintliest and most orthodox, who had an energetic abhorrence for anything resembling a sacred picture. This was Bishop Epiphanius of Salamis. Farrar records an excerpt from one of his letters to the Bishop of Jerusalem. It concerned a condition he found existing in the Jerusalem area. It appears that on a journey to Jerusalem, near Bethel, he had come upon a building in which he saw a lamp burning. On being informed the building was a church, he entered to pray. He saw there a curtain which had on it (as he goes on to write), "an image, as it were, of Christ, or of some saint, for I cannot quite remember whose likeness it was. Horrified to see

the likeness of a man, hanging *contrary to Scripture, in a Christian Church, I tore it down and ordered the vergers [attendants] to use it as the shroud of some pauper.*" (See also the article "Iconoclasts," *Encyclopaedia Britannica*, 11th edition, vol. 14, p. 272.)

Yes, even in the fourth century, the majority of Catholic officials were vehemently against the violation of the second commandment. Although, from this example, you can see that some bishops were beginning to allow pictures even in the churches.

By the end of the fourth century, because of the increased influx of pagan influence, the tide was beginning to turn in favor of the use of pictures for worship. Augustine, at the beginning of the fifth century, "complains that he knew many worshippers of superstitious pictures" (Farrar, p. 59). However, the majority was still opposed to their use. Farrar goes on to say that about the year 600 A.D., there was one Serenus, Bishop of Massilia who "broke up pictures and images in churches." This act of the bishop's reached the ears of Pope Gregory who disapproved "of his breaking them, though he commends his opposition to their idolatrous use" (p. 59).

Yes, there was still opposition to such violations of God's law even this late in the Catholic Church. Notice the Pope commended this bishop for his motives. This plainly shows that a knowledge of what was right was known to the ones in authority.

As strong paganistic influences entered the Catholic Church, however, a council of Catholic leaders was called in Constantinople in 691 A.D., in which they officially sanctioned the use of images and pictures in churches (Farrar, p. 100). There were some bishops dissenting from this form of idolatry, but the majority carried and the decree passed.

It was not until another Council of Constantinople, in 842 A.D., that the last vestiges of opposition to images and pictures were stamped out. From that time, until the present, most of professing Christianity has sanctioned images and the like in its churches. Some Protestants made a feeble attempt to

reform the Catholic Church from this imagery in the Reformation, but this they failed to accomplish.

#### How Was Christ Represented in Early Christian Art?

The "Christ" you see portrayed in pictures and images today is an effeminate-looking individual with long hair. There are some differences in portraying Him among the different artists, but generally He is the same.

But is the common picture we are used to actually the way Christ appeared while on this earth? Did He really have long hair and an effeminate look?

The very first pictures found of Christ are painted on the walls of the catacombs of Rome. Most of these pictures were painted during the second and third centuries and, it might be added, outside of the approval of the Catholic Church. That Church, we have seen, did not allow such representations at this early date. And, it is true, they should not have been drawn, but still there is something interesting in them for us today, for they show Christ in an entirely different form than we are accustomed to seeing Him.

#### What Early Paintings Looked Like

The earliest pictures in these catacombs date from about 100 years after the apostles. And those who sketched them were undoubtedly acquainted with individuals who were familiar with the general appearance of Christ that came by word of mouth from the apostles. The most ancient of these pictures is described by Roderic Dunkerley in his book *Beyond the Gospels*. He says: "In particular, there is a painting of the Resurrection of Lazarus in which Christ is shown — *youthful and beardless, with short hair and large eyes. . . . Although it is now only barely recognizable, this picture is of great interest since it is the oldest representation of Jesus that is preserved anywhere*" (p. 57).

Did you notice any difference from the common portrayals today? Christ is here depicted as young (He was around 33 when crucified) *and He is without a beard and with short hair*. Farrar, also speaking of these early portrayals of Christ, says, "He is almost invariably

boyish... *His hair is short*" (p. 43). These pictures are strikingly different from the "Christ" we see today in the churches of this land.

But, let us go on.

These early representations of Christ, being beardless and with short hair, persisted for a number of years. Dunkerley continues: "Reference may be made to another portrayal of Christ, dating from early in the third century. It was found on the wall of a house-chapel at Dura-Europos in the Syrian Desert in 1931-2 during excavations of Yale University and the French Academy of Inscriptions and Letters. . . . Here too He is young and without a beard and wearing the ordinary costume of the time" (p. 58). This picture was found near Palestine, and it corresponds with the portrayals of those found in Rome. The general appearance of Christ seems to have been known throughout the Roman world, and Christ's appearance was not as many think it today. In fact, Farrar says, "During the first four hundred years there is probably no representation of Christ as bearded, or as a worn and weary sufferer" (p. 52). Dunkerley also agrees with this deduction, when he states: "It is not until the fourth century [after Christ] that the familiar bearded face appears" (p. 58). These are amazing statements. It took about 400 years to evolve the "Christ" that we have been brought up to believe in. And this "Christ" is not the one the early Christians thought of — the Christ of the Bible. This is the picture of a false Christ — the one the whole world worships.

One should consider the *source* of these pictures. When one does, it's obvious they are not true representations of Christ.

#### Pagan Gods Became Direct Representations of Christ

Yes, this statement is a shocking one to make, but it is fact! Here's how it happened: The pagans, when they were brought into the "Christian" Church, instead of destroying their gods, turned them into Christ or other Biblical characters. They kept right on worshipping them, but calling them now by Christian names. "Of these types of Christ, *borrowed from Pagan*

*antiquity*," says Farrar, the favourite was Orpheus taming the wild beasts with his lyre" (Farrar, p. 30). When the pagans were converted to Christianity, they quit calling the pagan god Orpheus by his name of antiquity. Now, they called him "Christ." They reasoned that it was all right because Christ will tame the wild beasts in the millennium as Orpheus does. So, the pagan god Orpheus became Christ. They continued to paint the image of Orpheus but now it was Christ.

"No Pagan symbol, therefore, better accorded with their tone of mind than that which represented the youthful Orpheus bending the listening trees and charming the savage lions by his celestial harmonies. *It indicated Christ* as the King of Love and Peace, as the Law of life, and the Harmony of the world" (Farrar, pp. 33, 34).

Another authoritative work, edited by J. A. Hammerton, also has some information on this subject. He states: "For the Christians, even in the earliest days, observed the customs of their ancestors, *though with a new intention*." Continuing, "It [art] remains as it were *transformed*, seen with new eyes, and *drawn into the service of Christ*." Now notice this statement from this work: "Orpheus becomes a prophecy of Him [Christ] . . . and the Good Shepherd [Christ] bears the lamb on His shoulders *precisely as Hermes* (a pagan god) had been wont to do, but with a new tenderness. The portrait of Christ," Hammerton continues, "is but seldom found, but when we do find a presentment of Him . . . He is represented as young and *BEARDED*, with a smile on His lips, splendid *AS APOLLO*" (*Wonders of the Past*, p. 1119). Notice this! Here we find Christ represented with a *BEARD* — as you see Him portrayed today — and it is exactly as some ancient portrayals of the pagan god *APOLLO*. Need any more be said? Here is where the "Christ" of today comes from! It is nothing more than a portrait of a heathen god.

Farrar goes on to say, "Other Pagan symbols adopted by Christianity were those of the winged Psyche, the Sirens, and Hercules feeding the dragon with poppy seed. The story of Cupid and Psyche, of which there are several in-

stances, was chosen as the emblem of God's love for the soul" (p. 34). Yes, there were many pagan gods of the heathens and they brought them right into the "Christian" churches when they were "converted."

Because there were many of these pagan gods, they could not all represent Christ, for all of them had slightly different appearances. Augustine, the Catholic official in the fourth century stated that there were "in his time, innumerable pictures of Christ, which were all different" (Farrar, p. 73). We finally see the solidification of these varying pictures (representing many pagan gods) into the *common one today*.

Actually, today's representation is the blending together of the chief characteristics of the major pagan gods. The wisest and most powerful of the gods were portrayed *with beards and long hair*. The hair and beard represented their ancient wisdom and godliness.

#### Bible Proves Christ Did Not Wear Long Hair

God's Word very plainly shows that a man should not wear long hair — it is a shame (I Cor. 11:14). Christ did not wear long hair — as the first pictures show.

Some have erroneously assumed that Jesus was under a Nazarite vow (this was a vow of extreme humility) in which the hair should, for a period of time, grow long. But this is not so! Jesus was from the small town of Nazareth in Galilee and was called "Jesus of Nazareth," but this had nothing to do with a Nazarite vow! And the Scripture plainly shows that Christ was not a Nazarite while on this earth, for in Matthew 11:19 Jesus, Himself, stated that He came drinking wine. This was forbidden under a Nazarite vow (Num. 6:3).

Also, another proof of this is Matthew 26:48, 49. Here it says Jesus had to be kissed in order for the soldiers to know which one He was. If Christ had been dressed as a Nazarite, with long hair and old clothes (in other words, out of the ordinary), the soldiers would have recognized Him without His being pointed out.

The disciples were also dressed like

ordinary men because they were not fasting or under a Nazarite vow (Matt. 9:14, 15). The Bible is plain on this matter. Christ and the disciples dressed like ordinary men.

#### How Does Christ Actually Look Today?

Christ does not look like the pagan gods of Greece or Rome and as the world portrays Him today. There is no resemblance whatsoever. If you want a true Biblical picture of our Saviour, turn to Revelation 1:13-16. There is the real Christ. It is a description that no artist could paint nor any sculptor mold. This

is the Christ who has a face that shines as the sun in its full strength. He was so bright that John fell at His feet as dead when he saw Him (Rev. 1:17).

Here is Christ in His full power and glory — the Christ of the Bible. And this is the way He will appear when He comes back to this earth with all His glory (Matt. 24:30). Most people will be looking for a false Christ — the one pictured today. What a shock they will have when the REAL CHRIST is revealed!

#### Violating the Second Commandment?

In the light of these facts, we should ask ourselves if we are violating God's

commandments. Do we have pictures of this false Christ — the representation of pagan gods — in our homes, in our Bibles?

If we do have, we should do as God commanded the ancient Israelites in Numbers 33:52. "*Destroy all their [the heathen's] PICTURES, and destroy all their molten images, and quite pluck down all their high places.*" Yes, so let each of us rid himself of any form of idolatry — including this form of violating the second commandment. And, let us be about our Father's business, by always being in obedience to His commandments (I John 2:3, 4). □