

The Second Commandment

⁴ "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.

⁵ 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,

⁶ but showing steadfast love to thousands of those who love me and keep my commandments.

Exodus 20:4-6

According to the book of Enoch, a fallen Watcher named **Pênêmûe** (meaning “the inside”) taught humans **secret arts** and wisdom and how to pass those arts down through the ages with **ink and paper** (1 En 69:8-9). This is a strange thing, but it is also a common belief among ancient religions. The Egyptian god **Thoth**, the Roman god **Mercury**, and the Greek god **Hermes** are each identical to Pênêmûe in that they are the gods of **magic arts** and **writing** in their respective cultures. Plato (in *Timaeus* and *Critias*) reports that Hermes wrote down records that had been preserved in Egypt for thousands of years, and tens of thousands of writings of ancient antiquity were credited to him, some of which survive to this day (though not in their original form).

In the *City of God*, **Augustine** interacts with one of Hermes’ writings (probably the “Asclepius” dialogue in the *Hermetica* compendium) at great length. Augustine’s concern is how we are to view idols. Hermes believed **idols were “the bodies of the gods”** (*City*, 8.23.1), or more specifically, demons (which, according to Plato, derives from a Greek word [δαίμων] meaning “knowing”).¹ Now, you have to understand, that the term “demon” did not come to mean an exclusively evil creature until the Christian era (the NT sees demons in an entirely negative light). Before this, people viewed them as morally ambiguous. They could be described as good or evil, and a single demon could bring both good or ill, inflict harm or fulfill your desires when worship and service was rendered to it depending upon your piety or fate.

How they were said to do this was through the conduit of an idol, or the “body of the god.” They believed that in an idol dwelt the spirit of the demon, which was united to the idol by inviting the spirit to enter it (sort of like unsuspecting kids do when playing with an Ouija board), and then, through the secret arts (with the help of herbs, gems and odors), the idol would become inhabited, and it was said that the statue could then speak and engage in prophecy. But because it was an idol, people thought they could control the deity. One scholar puts it this way,

¹ **Homer** (*Iliad*. 3.420) derived it from δαίμων meaning “divinity.” **Eusebius** (*Praep. Ev.* 4.5.142) derived it from δειμαίνειν meaning “to fear.” **DDD** derives it from δαίω meaning “to divide (destines),” hence the idea of fate or the ability of the spirit to control your fate (*Dictionary of Deities and Demons in the Bible*, 235). But Augustine deals with Plato’s definition.

When a non-physical being manifested in a statue, this anchored the being in a controlled location where living human beings could interact with it through ritual performance . . . In order for human beings to interact with deities and to persuade them to create, renew, and maintain the universe, these beings had to be brought down to earth. . . . This interaction had to be strictly controlled in order to avoid both the potential dangers of unrestricted divine power and the pollution of the divine by the impurity of the human world. While the ability of deities to act in the visible, human realm was brought about through their manifestation in a physical body, manifestation in one body did not in any sense restrict a deity, for the non-corporeal essence of a deity was unlimited by time and space, and could manifest in all its “bodies,” in all locations, all at one time.²

I also want to mention that these same demons were often thought of as being the spirits of long since **dead men** (or nephilim).³ They were thought to dwell in the air, the space between heaven and earth (*City*, 9.8.1). And because of their unique position, they were thought to be **mediators between the gods and mankind** (*City* 8.23.1). Thus, they were revered and worshipped as much for this ability as for their supposed ability to inflict harm or generate blessing. Augustine destroys the idea that they can be mediators or that they should be mediators, but he does not disagree with what these beings probably are. My point, for now, is that idols were thought to be powerful, because they were sacramentally connected to the spiritual being.⁴ The ancients were not so naïve as to worship sticks in the mud. It was what stood behind the graven image that was the real power and source of worship.

The second commandment, in most Protestant schemes and the numbering as the Jews in Jesus’ day saw it, is found in **Exodus 20:4-6**. It contains three prohibitions, “**You shall not make for yourself a carved image**,” “**you shall not bow down**” to the carved image, and you shall not “**serve them**.” The three prohibitions are related, yet distinct. All three are applicable for all peoples at all times in all places. For, they are part of God’s moral law. Yet, to say that there has been confusion and misunderstanding about these prohibitions would be a *gross* understatement. Thus, I want to help you understand what is commanded and what is forbidden in the second commandment.

First, it says that we are not to make ourselves “**carved images**” (ESV). Various Christian translations also say “**idol**” (NAS) or “**graven image**,” (KJV). Jewish translations range from “**sculptured image**” (TNK), to “**image or likeness**” (OKE) to “**image or figure**” (PJE). You will

² Gay Robins, “Cult Statues in Ancient Egypt,” in *Cult Image and Divine Representation in the Ancient Near East* (ASOR Book Series 10; ed. Neal H. Walls; Boston: American Schools of Oriental Research, 2005), 1-2. Cited by Michael Heiser, “What is / are (an) Elohim?,” Evangelical Theological Society Meeting, 2010. <http://www.thedivinecouncil.com/WhatisareanelohimETS2010.pdf>

³ While Augustine cites this belief among the Egyptians and Greeks, the Hebrews had the same conception. 1 Enoch 15:8-16:1 reads, “⁸And now, the giants, who are produced from the spirits and flesh, shall be called evil spirits upon the earth, and on the earth shall be their dwelling.

⁹ Evil spirits have proceeded from their bodies; because they are born from **men** <and> from the holy Watchers is their beginning and primal origin; <they shall be evil spirits on earth, and> evil spirits shall they be called. ¹⁰ [As for the spirits of heaven, in heaven shall be their dwelling, but as for the spirits of the earth which were born upon the earth, on the earth shall be their dwelling.] ¹¹ And the spirits of the giants **afflict**, oppress, destroy, attack, do battle, and work destruction on the earth, and cause trouble: they take no food, <but nevertheless hunger> and thirst, <and cause offences. ¹² And these spirits shall rise up against the children of men and against the women, because they have proceeded <from them>. **16**¹ From the days of the slaughter and destruction and death <of the giants>, from the souls of whose flesh the spirits, having gone forth, shall destroy without incurring judgement—thus shall they destroy until the day of the consummation, the great <judgement> in which the age shall be consummated, over the Watchers and the godless, yea, shall be wholly consummated.”

⁴ Cf., John Frame, *The Doctrine of the Christian Life*, 454.

see the differences here momentarily. The word is *pesel*. It is related to the word *pasal*, which means “to carve, chisel, or dress” stone or wood. Before I go any farther, I want to ask, how do we interpret this properly? Are we to take this **literalistically** and woodenly, as if the command only forbids making images with a knife or other chiseling instrument, but that somehow a paintbrush or an image captured in a camera or a balloon figure would be admissible? In other words, is this case law, or is it a principle that is being set forth here? I have argued previously that **the Ten Commandments are principles** that have broad applications, some of which we will see more of as we work our way through Exodus.

Now, without knowing what *pesel* actually means, our misunderstanding of the command may continue as we read the next phrase. This carved thing must not be “**in the likeness of anything that is in heaven above, or that is in the earth beneath, or that is in the water under the earth.**” Again, taking this literally, some people have argued both in ancient times and our own, that the command forbids any representation of anything that God has created in any sphere of life. Thus, **artwork** as varied as sculpting a human figure, painting an apple, quilting a flower, or making a ceramic of a dog is forbidden. **Cameras**, too, are intrinsically evil, because they only have one function, which is to “create images.” **Television** sets are evil for the same reason, as are movies. So I ask, is this what the command is getting at? And how would we know if it wasn’t?

To answer these questions, I want to start by looking at the tabernacle and temple. For, **God commanded all sorts of images of creatures to be put here.** God commanded garlands of **fruit** and **flowers** and **trees** be carved into the sanctuary (**Num 8:4; 1 Kgs 6:18; 7:36**). The king’s throne was set upon carved **lions** (**1 Kgs 10:19-20**). Lions and **bulls** were carved into the great sea and other water basins (**1 Kgs 7:25, 29**). Especially important are the huge **cherubim** made of gold that stood over the ark of the covenant (**Ex 25:18-22; 1 Kgs 6:23-28; 8:6-7**). Remember another time when God commanded Moses to build a **fiery seraph** (or serpent) and set it on a pole (**Num 21:9**). The point of calling these to your attention is that God could not command such artwork and sculptures if the commandment forbade making them in the first place!

Now you are prepared to understand what a *pesel* is. A *pesel* is always a **cultic image**, used exclusively for the purpose of religious devotion. As such, the Jewish translations of a “chiseled image” or even more broadly an “image or likeness” is not a narrow enough for the way the word is used throughout the OT. In other words, the word is not forbidding secular images used for the purposes of art, entertainment, or remembrance. It forbids their use in religious activities, with religious purposes as the goal. We should not try to “fence the law” by making the commandment more strict than it is, like Jews do, out of fear that we might come close to disobeying the commandment. That is to add to the word, and it is a great sin, **as we will talk about later.**

And yet, weren’t all of the images above used in the sphere of worship? Isn’t the tabernacle and temple the central location of worship? Wasn’t the command to look upon the serpent a sort of religious devotion? I want to make two points here, and I’ll return to them later. First, you have to understand that in each of these things, God is picturing his invisible sanctuary

in heaven, and since it is invisible, only he knows how to depict it properly. If we try to invent things of our own imagination, we inevitably will get it wrong. Second, these things also prefigured Christ. Think about the seraph pole, for instance. Jesus says that he must be lifted up on the cross and that all who look to him will be saved. For us to return to those kinds of things would therefore be to return to shadows after the light of Christ has already come!

At this point, I want to talk about the other two prohibitions in the commandment. The first says that you are *not to bow down* to these carved images and that you are not *to serve them*. To bow down is to prostrate yourself in an act of submission and worship. In this case, it would be the bowing down to the image of the deity that is being represented. Serving them is doing what they tell you to do, by giving into your base desires. In this case, I think about the word abomination in association with the gods. As *Ashtoreth* (2 Kgs 23:13), *Milcom* (1 Kgs 11:5), *Chemosh* and *Molech* (11:7) are all referred to as “abominations,” so also is the worship and social practices that are associated with them, including *temple prostitution* (Deut 23:18-19; 1 Kgs 14:23-24); *human sacrifice* (Deut 12:31); *homosexuality* (Lev 18:22; 20:13), *transvestism* (Deut 22:5), *false weights and measures* (Deut 25:16), *unacceptable animal sacrifices* (Deut 14:3; 17:1), and *magic arts* like casting spells, mediums, spiritists, and calling upon the dead (Deut 18:10-12).

What we find with regard to the previous images is that we are *never told that anyone ever worshiped those found in the sanctuaries*. It is inconceivable that some Jew would walk by the carved lions and bulls and suddenly think he needed to bow down to them, for his focus was always what was on the inside (to him invisible) part: the holy place. As for the serpent-pole, we do know that it became a snare for Israel, one that had probably become an idol for them for many centuries, as memory of what its original purpose was for passed into legend and then into myth and then into idolatry. Thus, Hezekiah destroyed it, and God was pleased. Thus, the commandment teaches us not to make images for worship, and furthermore not to bow down and serve them. As Eusebius, the first church historian said, such a thing is a “*heathen custom*” (*Church History*, 7.18).

When we are talking about graven images, your mind should not go to Israel’s temple, but to the idols and artwork of the gods in Egypt, India, Greece, and other cultures. They depicted their gods as men, birds, frogs, scarabs, lions, or angels. In fact, almost anything that God has created, we have found a way to depict spiritual beings as being like some physical creature on earth. In this, you can see the relation of the second commandment to the first. There is a progression that takes place in the heart of men. First we break the second commandment, and then we break the first.

Deuteronomy 4 is an expansion of the second commandment, and it explains this a bit more clearly. It says that on the day that the LORD spoke out of the midst of the fire on the mountain “*You heard the sound of words, but saw no form; there was only a voice*” (12). Then it says, “*Since you saw no form. . . beware lest you act corruptly by making a carved image*” of the forms that were given in the second commandment (15-16). Then it says, “*And beware lest you*

raise your eyes to heaven, and when you see the sun, moon, and the stars, all the host of heaven, you be drawn away and bow down to them and serve them whom the lord your God has allotted to all the peoples under the whole heaven” (18-19). As we saw, last week, those whom the LORD has allotted, the “host of heaven” are the angelic principalities and rulers that God set over the nations.

This is a very important passage for understanding the second commandment, because nearly all of that command is reproduced in **Deut 4:15-31** (see table).

Exodus 20:4-6	Deuteronomy 15-19, 24-31
<p>⁴ "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.</p> <p>⁵ 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,</p> <p>⁶ but showing steadfast love to thousands of those who love me and keep my commandments.</p>	<p>¹⁵ Therefore watch yourselves very carefully. Since you saw no form on the day that the LORD spoke to you at Horeb out of the midst of the fire, ¹⁶ beware lest you act corruptly by making a carved image for yourselves, in the form of any figure, the likeness of male or female, ¹⁷ the likeness of any animal that is on the earth, the likeness of any winged bird that flies in the air, ¹⁸ the likeness of anything that creeps on the ground, the likeness of any fish that is in the water under the earth. ¹⁹ And beware lest you lift up your eyes to heaven, and when you see the sun and the moon and the stars, all the host of heaven, and be drawn away and bow down to them and serve them. And the LORD your God has allotted them, to all the peoples under the whole heaven. . . ²⁴ For the LORD your God is a consuming fire, a jealous God. ²⁵ "When you father children and children's children, and have grown old in the land, if you act corruptly by making a carved image in the form of anything, and by doing what is evil in the sight of the LORD your God, so as to provoke him to anger, ²⁶ I call heaven and earth to witness against you today, that you will soon utterly perish from the land. . . ³⁰ When you are in tribulation, and all these things come upon you in the latter days, you will return to the LORD your God and obey his voice. ³¹ For the LORD your God is a merciful God. He will not leave you or destroy you or forget the covenant with your fathers that he swore to them.</p>

The idea is straightforward. First, you are tempted to make a carved image in order to represent some heavenly being. Then, you are tempted to look up (a figurative expression) to the sun, moon, and stars (more figurative language for the place where the gods dwell), and worship those beings whom you have represented in the image. In other words, the temptation is to violate the second commandment first, and the first commandment after that. But no Israelite ever began by overtly breaking the first commandment at the beginning. It was always a spiraling down, as they were tempted with a lesser, more subtle sin, which then naturally progressed into a more grievous sin.

It is terribly important to realize, that while the second commandment does forbid making idols of the gods, it is much more concerned with imaging the true God. That is the point of it saying “You saw no form.” There are many OT stories that demonstrate this. But the paradigm story has to be **Aaron and the golden calf**. The people saw that Moses delayed in coming off the mountain (**Ex 32:1**). I’ll go with the NAS here. They asked Aaron to “make us a god” who will go before us. So Aaron accumulates lots of gold and it says he “fashioned it with a graving tool and made it into a molten calf.” In other words, the violated the command not to make a graven image.

Next, you see how this relates to the worship of Yahweh. Aaron says, “This is your god, O Israel.” What most people do not realize, however, is that Aaron was not making up new gods or returning to the old gods of Egypt. Good grief! Who would have ever bought into that, after they had all just seen the terrifying theophany on the top of the mountain, not to mention Yahweh’s power over the sea and the Pharaoh and the gods of Egypt? Could you even imagine

them now returning to new gods? Thus, Aaron says, “**This is your God, *who brought you up from the land of Egypt***” (32:4). In other words, this was a physical representation of the true God. Thus, Aaron concludes, “**Tomorrow will be a feast to Yahweh**” (5).

What this “feast” turned into was a veritable orgy of dancing and singing and probably other unspeakable things as well, a very far cry indeed from that kind of experience they had when God came to them on the mountain. And so, even though they were trying to worship Yahweh, and not some other deity, God gets furious, because the command not only forbids worshipping the gods, but making images of the true God, and worshipping him in a way he has not commanded.

Remember, every commandment has a negative and a positive. The negative is not to make, bow down, or serve images made for religious worship. But the positive is that you shall only worship God as he has commanded. **And so if the first commandment teaches us who to worship, the second teaches us how to worship.** This is the implication of the golden calf. It is also why it is dangerous to combine the first and second commandments into one, as if all that is being forbidden is the worship of other deities. Notice again, Aaron is only doing this so that the people can worship Yahweh. But if the first and second command are the same, then he isn’t breaking any command at all, for he is not worshipping a different god! Yet, God is furious. Why? Because he is worshipping God through an image and a feast of his own imagination, supposing that God will be pleased, because he is sincere.

This is why our catechism rightly teaches us, “**The second commandment requires the receiving, observing, and keeping pure and entire, all such religious worship and ordinance as God has appointed in his word**” (*Shorter Catechism* Q. 50). “**The second commandment forbids the worshipping of God by images, or any other way not appointed in his Word**” (Q. 51). Moses was not only furious with the calf, but with the kind of “feast” that it turned into. Worshipping God only in the ways he has commanded is called the **Regulative Principle of Worship**, and I have preached on it in other places. But it is derived as the positive principle of the second commandment. I have too much other stuff to get through to go into more detail of this here.

What I want to focus on now, is a couple of applications of the commandment in our day. The first is **statues and pictures of saints, Mary, and Christ** as they are used in religious devotion in many parts of Christianity. Let me use Rome as a test case for this. I was reading an entry on this week on the “**Veneration of Images**” in the *Catholic Encyclopedia*⁵, to see how they justify pictures and sculptures of these people. What I found shocked and amazed me.

The article gave a very good history of the controversy throughout church history over the use of these artifacts in God’s worship. I was actually shocked at how balanced and fair it was. They quoted the Roman historian **Tacitus** (57-117 AD) who wrote about the Jews in this regard, “**They worship one God in their minds only. They hold those to be profane who make images of the gods with corruptible materials in the likeness of man, for he is supreme and eternal, neither**

⁵ <http://www.newadvent.org/cathen/07664a.htm>

changeable nor mortal. Therefore they allow no images in their cities or temples” (*Hist.* 5.4). They cite such notable church fathers as **Athenagoras** (*A Plea for the Christians* 15-17), **Theophilus** (*Ad Autolyicum* 2), **Tertullian** (*On Idolatry* 1), and **Cyprian** (*On the Vanity of Idols*) who all “denounce not only the worship but even the manufacture and possession of such images.” **Eusebius** wrote many times to Constantine’s sister “not to keep a statue of our Lord” (*Mansi* 13.169). One of his contemporary bishops (Asterius of Amasia) wrote, “Do not paint pictures of Christ, he humbled himself enough by becoming man.” Another church father (**Epiphanius of Salamis**, d. 403) “tore down a curtain in a church in Palestine because it had a picture of Christ or a saint.” They quote the **Emperor Michael II** (820-9) who wrote about what was taking place in churches in his day, “They have removed the holy cross from the churches and replaced it by images before which they burn incense. . . They sing Psalms before these images, prostrate themselves before them, implore their help. Many dress up images in linen garments and choose them as godparents for their children. Monks. . . let their hair fall into the hands of some image. Some priests scrape the paint off images, mix it with the consecrated bread and wine and give it to the faithful. Others place the body of the Lord in the hands of images from which it is taken by the communicants. Others again, despising the churches, celebrate Divine Service in private houses, using an image as an altar” (*Mansi*, 14.417-22).

They quote a **general synod of the Church of Spain**, held about 300 AD, in the city of Granada, which came out with a canon which read, “It is ordained that pictures are not to be in churches, so that that which is worshipped and adored shall not be painted on walls.” Yet, all of this did not stop another council (the second Nicene council, and seventh and last ecumenical council) from concluding that images are acceptable, and the veneration of them is necessary in the church. Surely **Luther** was right, that councils have many times contradicted each other! Apparently, none of *this* “tradition” is relevant to these people!

What stuns me about the whole thing is that here is their justification for the use of images. They cite the **coronation of images**, where a person would place a crown as a symbol of honor upon the statue. They begin, “The Greek pagans offered golden crowns to their idols as specifically worthy gifts.” Next sentence, “St. Irenaeus (d. 202) already notices that certain Christian heretics (the Carpocratian Gnostics) crown their images.” Next sentence, “He disapproves of the practice.” Parenthetical comment, “it seems that part of his dislike at any rate is because they crown statues of Christ alongside of those of Pythagoras, Plato, and Aristotle” (*Against Heresies*, 1.25.6). This comment is inserted in order to soften the blow Irenaeus’ disdain for images of Christ.⁶ Next sentence, “The offering of crowns to adorn images became a common practice in the Eastern Churches.” In other words, it wasn’t common, but it became so. Next relevant sentence, “At Rome, too, a ceremony evolved out of this pious practice [of decorating those images with gold and affixing a crown to its head]. A famous case is the coronation of the picture of our Lady in St. Mary Major. [Pope] Clement VIII (1592-1605) presented crowns (one for our Lord and one for His Mother) to adorn it; so also did succeeding

⁶ This is a terrible reading of Irenaeus. He begins that section by saying, “They also possess images, some of them painted, and others formed from different kinds of material.” In other words, the very possession of images was foreign to Irenaeus as a Christian.

popes.” In other words, friends, the justification of the self-admitted pagan practice is that the churches started doing it too, and the Popes gave their blessing through their own actions. If they did it, it can't be wrong, by definition! This is astonishing and I remain in disbelief at the complete disregard for the Scripture here.

In fact, the only biblical “justification” given for the veneration of images is this, “The First Commandment [remember, this includes the second commandment for Rome] (except inasmuch as it forbids the adoration and service of images) does not affect us at all.” Why? “The Old Law—including the ten commandments—as far as it only [legislates] natural law is of course eternal. No possible circumstances can ever abrogate, for instance the First, Sixth, and Seventh Commandments. On the other hand, as far as it is positive law, it was once for all abrogated by the legislation of the Gospel. Christians are not bound to circumcise, to abstain from leuitically unclean food and so on. The Third Commandment [our fourth] that ordered the Jews to keep Saturday holy is a typical case of a positive law abrogated and replaced by another by the Christian Church. So in the First Commandment we must distinguish the clauses – “Thou Shalt not have strange gods before me,” “Thou shall not adore them nor serve them” – which are eternal natural law, from the clause: “Thou shalt not make to thyself any grave image.” In whatever sense the archaeologist may understand this, it is clearly not natural law, nor can anyone prove the inherent wickedness of making a graven thing. . . it no more applies to Christians than the law of marrying one's brother's widow.” I think a Dispensationalist might be shocked at how badly that tortures the difference between the Old and New Testaments!

Let me add the rest of the second commandment here in order to make a point. God gives a reason for the second commandment. It says, “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.” What you can see in the history of this topic, whether in OT Judges and Kings or in Church history, is how true God's promise is here.

You see, God is a jealous God, especially when his own glory is at stake. Some people have problems with this kind of language, but think about it. If God wasn't jealous for his glory, then he would be guilty of violating the first commandment, for he would either be giving his glory to another, or be willfully allowing it to be done. But this would be to have another god before Himself. Such a thing is unthinkable. So, while jealousy in us is usually bad (though jealousy for God is not a bad thing), God must be jealous for the sake of his name. In fact, in Exodus 34:14, his Name *is* Jealous. His jealousy is wrapped up in his goodness, justice, and holiness.

God's jealousy leads him to punish. The punishment is generational, not in the sense that God is punishing children for the sins of the fathers (something he elsewhere says he will not do; cf. Ezek 18:14-20), but as John Frame puts it, “Idolatrous parents create an atmosphere in their families that encourages their children, even later generations, also to be idolatrous.” Think again on the gross superstitions that began to accompany the “innocent” making of

statues, as **Emperor Michael II** explained it. There is a darkness that follows each generation, when the previous generation either rebels against God or remains in the darkness of the rebellion of an even earlier generation. This is why the Middle Ages were called the “Dark Ages,” and it was “Dark” in part because of the introduction of idolatry through the innocuous veneration of saints and Mary and even Christ through graven images.

We are seeing the same thing in America too. Once upon a time in this country, it was common for the society to teach the commandments of God, even in public school. I was just in Craig, CO. In their museum, they have the cornerstone of the public school built around 1910. Inside that cornerstone, of the public school, is a bible! But the erosion of biblical literacy can be traced to the rebellion of elites several generations back, which then worked its way downward to the culture at large, which rebelled in blatant wickedness in the 1960s. Now, we have the third generation being born since then, and this one knows virtually nothing of biblical law or Christianity. The sins of the parents have found us out. Now, to see the impact of this in one interesting way, walk down the shops of Estes Park and you will see dozens of shops filled with idols of the gods and the saints of Christianity, when not even 15 years ago, you could barely find a single one.

This is why **Deuteronomy 4:9-10** puts the second commandment positively, “**Only 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. Make them known to your children and your children’s children [it is the job of grandparents as much as parents to teach little children!]. How on the day that you stood before the LORD your God at Horeb, the LORD said to [Moses], ‘Gather the people to me, that I may let them hear my words, so that they may learn to fear me all the days that they live on the earth, and that they may teach their children so.’**”

If we do not teach them, they will not know, for such knowledge is not attainable through nature. And if they do not know, then they will walk in darkness and perish from the face of the earth. This is why **church and family catechesis are not only a good idea, they are mandatory and obligatory**. You must not think only of your own personal faith, but of passing your faith down through your family, for God is faithful to his promises, even to a thousand generations of those who love him and keep his commandments. There is no more important thing you can do in this life.

The new “tradition” of bringing statues and paintings introduced by the eastern church and followed quickly by the west was, by Rome’s own admission, was nothing but the adoption of Paganism made acceptable because our idols are good guys. With that comment, let me return to my introduction to make an interesting comparison.

Remember how I stated that pagans viewed demons as morally neutral? You can’t read Christian views of these creatures into the beliefs of the nations. There is a similarity going on there. The church only iconizes saints, heroes of the faith. Well, pagans did the same with the Heroes of old, famous men (**Gen 6:4 NET**). Remember also, that they believed that the demons

were nothing but the spirits of dead men. Who are these long deceased saints of iconography in the church, if not the same thing? Finally, think about the role that the demons played. They were mediators, intercessors between the gods and men. Do not the saints, particularly when iconized in a church statue or painting, serve an identical function? This is why Eastern and Roman churches pray to Mary and the Saints. When viewed from this perspective (one that I've not run into in quite this way before), it demonstrates how the veneration of our Christian ancestors through graven images is identical to demon worship. I realize that these people are not intentionally trying to worship demons, and in this way they are doing only what Aaron led the children of Israel into so many centuries earlier. Nevertheless, how can anyone in their right mind, after seeing such a comparison, come to any other conclusion than that this is why the commandment teaches us what it does. No tradition, no matter how pious it feels, is ever to contradict the Scripture. The only traditions we are to be unwavering on are those handed down by the Apostles, and this surely is not one of them! This kind of practice, along with the supposed need to remember Jesus through pictures and other such charms, is by the explicit admission of Rome, nothing but sanctified paganism.

With that, I have only one final point. I have talked a lot today about images. But I have said nothing about [the images that God has made and shown to us](#), and how they relate to the commandment. I am talking here about [humanity](#) in the flesh, the image of God ([Gen 1:26](#)). You see, God made images, not for us to worship, but for the purpose of worshipping him, and those images are you and I. He created us to worship God in his sanctuary. Whenever we enter God's presence together, we fill the holy place with images, images which he has created and deemed acceptable in his presence.⁷ Is it any wonder, compared to humans, that idols are mocked as those which "[neither see, nor hear, nor eat, nor smell](#)" (cf. [Deut 4:28](#), [Rev 9:20](#)). No man-made image was, is, or ever will be capable of such a thing. No wonder [Habakkuk \(2:18\)](#) refers to all such graven images as "[teachers of lies.](#)"

But, even in this, we cannot look ultimately to ourselves. For even though we are image-bearers of the creator, this image is broken and stained with sin. (How much worse, then, our idols that we erect which are facsimiles of fallen image bearers)? In this way, consider Jesus Christ. If we want to talk about the image of one who is good, then there is only one, and it is not an image of the one, but the One Himself. If we want to talk about a man who died, then we need to also look to the man who was raised from the dead by his own power and promise. And if we want to talk about a mediator between God and man, there is no saint or demon that does this. Job predicted him as "[an angel, a mediator, one of the thousand, who declares to man what is right for him](#)" ([Job 33:23](#)). But the Apostle, in the fullness of time declares, "[There is one God, and there is one mediator between God and men, the man Christ Jesus](#)" ([1 Tim 2:5](#)), who didn't just die as a hero, but "[gave himself as a ransom for all, the testimony given at the proper time](#)" ([6](#)).

⁷ In contradistinction to the images (*tselem*) of [Num 33:52](#), [2 Kgs 11:18](#) and other places which use the same word as Gen 1:26 to describe the images of the gods.

Thus, the second commandment is ultimately about him and him alone. Not about a statue or painting, not about a saint or even Mary, especially not about a demon or a god. That is why you are not to make any graven images, and you must worship God as he has required. That worship is done properly only by coming to the one called “the radiance of God’s glory, the exact representation of his nature” (Heb 1:3), “the image of the invisible God” (2 Cor 4:4) and “firstborn of all creation” (Col 1:15). He came in the flesh and was seen by men, but now has been ascended and been revealed to you by the word, even as he was at Sinai, by the word rather than the image. He who has an ear, let him hear.

Excursus: Imagination.

The Larger Catechism forbids, not only the making of images of God, but even the imagining of him in our minds. “Imagination” is literally “image-initiation.” There is a two-fold problem here. First, God has imaged himself in many ways, including that of a dove, an eagle, a pillar of fire, a cloud, an angel, and a man. Thus, when we read about such images and realize that they describe God, we cannot help (and I do not think we should help) imagining these things in our minds. Indeed, when we read anything, part of reading and hearing is to use the imagination. It is simply not possible to read that a dove descended upon Christ and not image a dove in the mind.

Second, some iconoclasts take disdain of images to the point that nothing can be admitted into the worship of God that is an image. But this does not comprehend that everything, not matter how mundane, is an image of something. Even if you met in a room filled only with white walls, this is an image of something. Perhaps it conjures in your mind a hospital room or a mental ward. That is probably not the kind of thing one wants to create an image of in the imagination of the worshipper!

Thus, when thinking about our images in corporate worship, images that are not made for the purpose of religious worship, veneration, or devotion, we ought to use common sense and wisdom. Pulpits are images. They display the importance of the word. If you hide the pulpit, you tell people something through the lack of an image (namely, that the word is not important in this place). If you have the ability to use a good pulpit, but opt instead for a music stand, you say to people that the word is rather trivial here. One can do this with any object in the room, be it a big white screen designed to display words or pictures overhead, pews or chairs, even the rooms that we choose to meet in such as gymnasiums with their basketball hoops or movie theaters with their dramatic arrangement and silver screen. Crosses and fishes are probably a half-way point between a pulpit and an idol, because while it is not an image of a creature, it is seemingly meant for devotion (demonstrated when Catholics “cross” themselves).

While these things are not in and of themselves good or bad, and Christians can meet in such places and use or not use any of these things, it seems to me that if we have the time, money, and ability to make permanent worship centers, that these churches ought to symbolize biblical worship and point to its centrality in our corporate life without teaching people lies. If we do not do this, then we show, in how we choose to build them and decorate them, that other things are at least as important to us, if not more so (i.e. fellowship, exercise, entertainment, etc).

Calvin rightly called the mind of mankind “an idol factory.” What we ought not to do is to turn this factory into an assembly line. In Calvin’s day, a wheel for a carriage would be made by hand, one at a time. The process was slow and deliberate. But since Ford’s great invention, we can now make wheels for our cars (which are also made on an assembly line) at speeds incomprehensible to earlier people. This is what putting images into worship can do to us. They can turn the slow idol factory into a plant that we fill up with idols in a matter of minutes. Why would we want to stimulate our already wicked hearts with such temptations? Why add fertilizer to weeds?

Thus, we should strive to be word centered, rather than image centered, ear centered rather than eye centered. God knows what is best for us, and he has chosen this to be the means of communication in our day. Yet, he has given us two very important images, images which not only feed the eyes, but the nose, mouth, ears, and touch as well. He has given us pictures of Christ's passion in baptism and the Supper. These are the "visible gospel," the means of grace which satisfy our need to look and see that the Lord is good. Let us be satisfied in his good gifts in the essentials, while seeking to use wisdom and common sense in things indifferent.

SHORTER

Q. 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. [127]

Q. 51. What is forbidden in the second commandment?

A. The second commandment forbiddeth the worshiping of God by images, [128] or any other way not appointed in his Word. [129]

Q. 52. What are the reasons annexed to the second commandment?

A. The reasons annexed to the second commandment are, God's sovereignty over us, [130] his propriety in us, [131] and the zeal he hath to his own worship. [132]

Larger

Question 108: What are the duties required in the second commandment?

Answer: The duties required in the second commandment are, the receiving, observing, and keeping pure and entire, all such religious worship and ordinances as God has instituted in his Word; particularly prayer and thanksgiving in the name of Christ; the reading, preaching, and hearing of the Word; the administration and receiving of the sacraments; church government and discipline; the ministry and maintenance thereof; religious fasting; swearing by the name of God, and vowing unto him: as also the disapproving, detesting, opposing, all false worship; and, according to each one's place and calling, removing it, and all monuments of idolatry.

Question 109: What are the sins forbidden in the second commandment?

Answer: The sins forbidden in the second commandment are, all devising, counseling, commanding, using, and anywise 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 worshiping 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 has appointed.

Question 110: What are the reasons annexed to the second commandment, the more to enforce it?

Answer: The reasons annexed to the second commandment, the more to enforce it, contained in these words, For I the Lord thy God 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; are, besides God's sovereignty over us, and propriety in us, his fervent zeal for his own worship, and his revengeful indignation against all false worship, as being a spiritual whoredom; accounting the breakers of this commandment such as hate him, and threatening to punish them unto divers generations; and esteeming the observers of it such as love him and keep his commandments, and promising mercy to them unto many generations.