

# *Pictures of Christ and the Second Commandment*

**John Murray (1898-1975)**

THE question of the propriety of pictorial representations of the Saviour is one that merits examination. It must be granted that the worship of Christ is central in our holy faith, and the thought of the Saviour must in every instance be accompanied with that reverence which belongs to his worship. We cannot think of him without the apprehension of the majesty that is his. If we do not entertain the sense of his majesty, then we are guilty of impiety and we dishonor him.

It will also be granted that the only purpose that could properly be served by a pictorial representation is that it would convey to us some thought or lesson representing him, consonant with truth and promotive of worship. Hence the question is inescapable: is a pictorial representation a legitimate way of conveying truth regarding him and of contributing to the worship which this truth should evoke?

We are all aware of the influence exerted on the mind and heart by pictures. Pictures are powerful media of communication. How suggestive they are for good or for evil and all the more so when accompanied by the comment of the spoken or written word! It is futile, therefore, to deny the influence exerted upon mind and heart by a picture of Christ. And if such is legitimate, the influence exerted should be one constraining to worship and adoration. To claim any lower aim as that served by a picture of the Saviour would be contradiction of the place which he must occupy in thought, affection, and honour.

The plea for the propriety of pictures of Christ is based on the fact that he was truly man, that he had a human body, that he was visible in his human nature to the physical senses, and that a picture assists us to take in the stupendous reality of his incarnation, in a word, that he was made in the likeness of men and was found in fashion as a man.

Our Lord had a true body. He could have been photographed. A portrait could have been made of him and, if a good portrait, it would have reproduced his likeness.

Without doubt the disciples in the days of his flesh had a vivid mental image of Jesus' appearance and they could not but have retained that recollection to the end of their days. They could never have entertained the thought of him as he had sojourned with them without something of that mental image and they could not have entertained it without adoration and worship. The very features which they remembered would have been part

and parcel of their conception of him and reminiscent of what he had been to them in his humiliation and in the glory of his resurrection appearance. Much more might be said regarding the significance for the disciples of Jesus' physical features.

Jesus is also glorified in the body and that body is visible. It will also become visible to us at his glorious appearing "he will be seen the second time without sin by those who look for him unto salvation" (Hebrews 9:28).

What then are we to say of pictures of Christ? First of all, it must be said that we have no data whatsoever on the basis of which to make a pictorial representation; we have no descriptions of his physical features which would enable even the most accomplished artist to make an approximate portrait. In view of the profound influence exerted by a picture, especially on the minds of young people, we should perceive the peril involved in a portrayal for which there is no warrant, a portrayal which is the creation of pure imagination. It may help to point up the folly to ask: what would be the reaction of a disciple, who had actually seen the Lord in the days of his flesh, to a portrait which would be the work of imagination on the part of one who had never seen the Saviour? We can readily detect what his recoil would be.

No impression we have of Jesus should be created without the proper revelatory data, and every impression, every thought, should evoke worship. Hence, since we possess no revelatory data for a picture or portrait in the proper sense of the term, we are precluded from making one or using any that have been made.

Secondly, pictures of Christ are in principle a violation of the second commandment. A picture of Christ, if it serves any useful purpose, must evoke some thought or feeling respecting him and, in view of what he is, this thought or feeling will be worshipful. We cannot avoid making the picture a medium of worship. But since the materials for this medium of worship are not derived from the only revelation we possess respecting Jesus, namely, Scripture, the worship is constrained by a creation of the human mind that has no revelatory warrant. This is will worship. For the principle of the second commandment is that we are to worship God only in ways prescribed and authorized by him. It is a grievous sin to have worship constrained by a human figment, and that is what a picture of the Saviour involves.

Thirdly, the second commandment forbids bowing down to an image or likeness of anything in heaven above, or in the earth beneath, or that is in the water under the earth. A picture of the Saviour purports to be a representation or likeness of him who is now in heaven or, at least, of him when he sojourned upon the earth. It is plainly forbidden, therefore, to bow down in worship before such a representation or likeness. This exposes the iniquity involved in the practice of exhibiting pictorial representations of the Saviour in places of worship. When we worship before a picture of our Lord, whether it be in the form of a mural, or on canvas, or in stained glass, we are

doing what the second commandment expressly forbids. This is rendered all the more apparent when we bear in mind that the only reason why a picture of him should be exhibited in a place is the supposition that it contributes to the worship of him who is our Lord. The practice only demonstrates how insensitive we readily become to the commandments of God and to the inroads of idolatry. May the Churches of Christ be awake to the deceptive expedients by which the archenemy ever seeks to corrupt the worship of the Saviour.

In summary, what is at stake in this question is the unique place which Jesus Christ as the God-man occupies in our faith and worship and the unique place which the Scripture occupies as the only revelation, the only medium of communication, respecting him whom we worship as Lord and Saviour. The incarnate Word and the written Word are correlative. We dare not use other media of impression or of sentiment but those of his institution and prescription. Every thought and impression of him should evoke worship. We worship him with the Father and the Holy Spirit, one God. To use a likeness of Christ as an aid to worship is forbidden by the second commandment as much in his case as in that of the Father and Spirit.

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