

# Pictures of the Christ

J. Marcellus Kik

*“Thou shalt not make unto thee any graven image, or any likeness of any thing that is in heaven above, or that is in the earth below, or that is in the water under the earth. Thou shalt not bow down thyself to them, nor serve them: 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 shewing mercy unto thousands of them that love me, and keep my commandments.”—Exodus 20:4-6*

In this second commandment we are forbidden to make any graven 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. We are forbidden to bow down to them or to serve them. Now the question has been asked whether or not this commandment forbids the use of pictures of Christ. Naturally the commandment forbids the bowing down before such pictures and worshipping them. There can be no question of that. But in many Protestant churches and in many evangelical churches pictures of Christ are used in teaching and in the homes of Christians pictures of Christ are hung up to remind them, I suppose, of Christ. Is that Scriptural? Does it meet with the approval of God? Is it sinful? It is another way of breaking the second commandment?

No doubt, if I state that the use of pictures of Christ is unscriptural: that it does not meet with the approval of God: that it is sinful; and that it is a breaking of the second commandment—I will be considered a fanatic, a reactionary, and perhaps not quite normal. But before you have such unkind thoughts, please hear me out. If we are Christians, our service and worship will be regulated by the Word of God. The Bible is our infallible guide in faith and worship. Now here is the surprising thing. Nowhere in the Bible, either in the Old Testament or New Testament, is there a physical description of Christ. Isn't that strange if God wanted to use the picture of Christ in spreading the Gospel or in worship, that we are not told whether Christ was tall or short, fair or dark, light or dark hair, blue eyes or brown eyes?

With all their love for the Lord you would think that Peter or John would have given a description of Him unless, of course, they were forbidden. They wrote under the inspiration of the Holy Spirit. Surely it is significant that neither they nor any other of the Scriptures gave a physical description of the Lord. Surely if God desired the use of pictures of Christ to further the cause of Christ He would have had a physical description of His Son in His Word. Why should we consider ourselves wiser than God and provide what he has deliberately left out?

The second amazing fact is that in the first four centuries of the history of the Church, no picture of Christ was used. These were the years when the Church made her most astonishing growth. These were the years in which the Christians conquered pagan Rome. It is so frequently stated that we need pictures of Christ to teach the Gospel. The apostle Peter did not need pictures of Christ to instruct the young or bring the Gospel to adults. The apostle John did not need pictures of Christ to convert pagans and instruct the Church. The apostle John did not need pictures of Christ to convert Barbarians and Greeks. The early church did not need pictures of Christ to conquer paganism. They accomplished it by preaching the Word in the power of the Holy Spirit.

When pictures were first introduced they were opposed. The Church historian Eusebius who lived in the fourth century declared himself in the strongest manner against images of Christ in a letter to Empress Constantia who asked him for such an image. Amongst other things Eusebius wrote: “Who can therefore counterfeit by dead and insensible colors, by vain shadowing painter's art, the bright and shining glistering of such His glory? Whereas His holy disciples were not able to behold the same in the mountain; who therefore, falling on their faces, acknowledged they were not able to behold such a sight.”

Here Eusebius touches on one of the reasons why it is impossible to have a true picture of Christ. If you want a picture of Christ do you want it as He was upon earth or as He is now in heaven? If you want a

picture of Him as He was upon earth, you have quite a problem. There was no picture of Him painted. The so-called picture of Christ which are present today are from the imaginations of the artists. That is why there are so many different pictures. Not one of them is a true picture. So every time you say this or that is a picture of Christ, you are uttering a lie. You cannot teach truth by a lie. Christ is the Truth and surely He would not want the use of a false means to point to Him. Christ abhors lies and falsehoods.

How would you like it if someone who never saw you painted a picture and told everyone that it was a picture of you? Certainly, you would resent it. And certainly Christ must resent all those counterfeit pictures of Him.

But supposing you wanted a picture of Christ as He is now. The disciples had such a vision of Him on the mount of transfiguration. We read in Matthew 17:2, "And his face did shine as the sun, and his raiment was white as the light." This was the glorified Christ. No artist could give us a picture of Christ which would show the glowing of Christ's face as the sun and His raiment as white as the light. They would only rob Christ of His glory by miserably falling short of a true painting of Christ in His present glory.

But someone will state that at least we can depict the humanity of Christ as He appeared upon earth. But who are we to separate His humanity from His divinity! The apostle John states in his Gospel, chapter 1:14, "And the Word was made flesh, and dwelt among us, (and we beheld his glory, the glory as of the only begotten of the Father,) full of grace and truth." Notice that the apostle states that even while Christ was in the flesh they beheld His divinity as well as his humanity. This, one cannot paint. So one must not behold His humanity as separate from His divinity. Then one falls into the ancient error of Nestorius. He stated that Christ consisted of two persons: one human and the other divine. There was, according to Nestorius, a separation between the human and the divine persons.

That was the ground on which the Council called by Constantine V condemned paintings of Christ. You see, this question of pictures of Christ was the subject of controversy throughout the eight century. So Constantine called a council in 753 of three hundred and thirty bishops. Their conclusion was this: "If any person shall divide human nature, united to the Person of God the Word; and, having it only in the imagination of his mind, shall therefore, attempt to paint the same in an Image; let him be holden as accursed. If any person shall divide Christ, being but one, into two persons; placing on the one side the Son of God, and on the other side the son of Mary; neither doth confess the continual union that is made; and by that reason doth paint in an image the son of Mary, as subsisting by himself; let him be accursed. If any person shall paint in an image the human nature, being deified by the uniting thereof to God the Word; separating the same as it were from the Godhead assumed and deified; let him be holden as accursed."

This council points out the difficulty and indeed the impossibility of painting a portrait of Christ. Christ is more than man. He is God-man. It is impossible to depict by a painter's brush the almighty power of Christ; the glorious majesty of Christ; the infinite knowledge of Christ. You cannot localize by a painter's brush the everywhere presence of Christ. One can only succeed in degrading Christ. When one considers the deity of Christ it is no wonder that the apostles did not attempt a physical description of their Lord and Savior. There is always, also, the danger of worshipping the picture of Christ and attaching power to it. Even a Protestant publishing firm stated that there is power in a picture of Christ. It is stated: "When one plants deeply and firmly in his mind the picture of Christ, it has a strong and powerful influence in his life." Thus instead of attributing this influence to Christ and the Holy Spirit they attribute it to the picture they are trying to sell. That is a breaking of the second commandment.

But can it not help in the saving of souls, it is asked. But how? Looking at a picture of Christ hanging upon the cross tells me nothing. It does not tell me that He hung there for sin. It does not tell me that He is the Son of God. Only the Word of God does that. And it is the Word of God that has been given us to tell the story of salvation through the blood of Christ. It is not through the foolishness of pictures that sinners are converted but through the foolishness of preaching.

It is amazing how slowly unscriptural practices enter the Christian Church. We must at all times go back to the Scriptures. The Bible is our infallible guide. And if our practices and doctrines do not conform with the teachings of the Scriptures, then we must eliminate them. The Bible instructs the Church not to make any likeness of Christ. The present day pictures of Christ are false and no one would make a serious claim that they resemble Christ upon earth. They separate His humanity from His deity. They do not at all give us a

glimpse of his present glory. They are not condoned by the inspired apostles. God has ordained the foolishness of preaching to evangelize the world. He has promised to attend the preaching of the Word with the power of the Holy Spirit. The so-called pictures of Christ are a hindrance and a temptation to idolatry. Let us cleanse the Temple of God from them. ✎