

Pictures of Jesus

And the Sovereignty of Divine Revelation:

Recent Literature and a Defense of the Confessional Reformed View¹

By David VanDrunen

INTRODUCTION

Reformed Christians are used to hearing critiques of their theology from those outside the tradition, but perhaps no Reformed idea has drawn as much internal dissent and triggered as much home-grown unease as the prohibition of pictures of Jesus via the second commandment. Whether through benign neglect (in the use of illustrated story Bibles or Christmas cards with manger scenes) or intentional opposition by preachers and theologians, the prohibition of pictures of Jesus may hardly seem to be a genuine feature of contemporary Reformed Christianity but more like a relic of a quaint past enshrined in a few confessional documents. Whatever are we to make of this issue and can the Reformed community agree on a doctrine that will match its practice (and vice versa)?

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1. My sincere thanks to editor Chris Coldwell, both for inviting me to write this piece and for supplying a number of sources of which I would otherwise have been unaware.

2. E.g., see Willemien Otten, "The Tension Between Word and Image in Christianity," in *Iconoclasm and Iconoclasm: Struggle for Religious Identity*, ed. Willem van Asselt, Paul van Geest, Daniela Müller, and Theo Salemink (Leiden: Brill, 2007) 33–48.

3. See Anton Houtepen, "The Dialectics of the Icon: A Reference to God?" in *Iconoclasm and Iconoclasm*, 49–73.

4. David Bentley Hart speaks of how "theology has suffered, historically, from a variety of etherializing susceptibilities," of which one example is "the Calvinist mysticism of bare and unadorned worship (which idolatrously mistakes God for some object that can be lost

If we have wondered about ourselves, plenty of others have wondered about us too. According to some writers, Protestant opposition to religious imagery, and especially the hard-core Reformed version, was an expression of bibliolatry² or a precursor to the larger secularization of the West.³ Other claims have an ironic character. Some writers have suggested that the Reformed have an idolatrous conception of God⁴ (ironic since other people's idolatry was precisely what we were trying to avoid) or harbor latent Eutychian proclivities⁵ (ironic since that was what we always suspected of Lutheran ubiquitarianism). Whatever the case, scholars in various fields have pondered the historic Reformed view in the context of the larger and deeper spiritual issue of religious imagery. In recent years writers have explored the dynamics of iconoclastic tendencies across religious traditions,⁶ the ancient Near Eastern context of

among other objects)...". See *The Beauty of the Infinite: The Aesthetics of Christian Truth* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 2003) 255. Readers may not be surprised to learn that Hart cites no sources to explain exactly what he means.

5. In the eighth century debates the iconoclasts often sounded like Eutychians/monophysites to the iconophiles. When the former argued that images of Jesus were only able to portray his human nature and thus could not do justice to the union of the human and divine natures (hence separating the natures in Nestorian fashion), the latter perceived a mixing of the natures and hence a failure to distinguish properly between them. See, e.g., Alain Besançon, *The Forbidden Image: An Intellectual History of Iconoclasm*, trans. Jane Marie Todd (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2000) 125–126. As will be observed below, many Reformed authors historically have echoed the old iconoclasts' arguments about the Nestorian tendencies of their opponents. In response, one defender of pictures of Jesus from within the Reformed community has suggested that a recent defender of the traditional position may be guilty of Eutychianism. See Jeffrey J. Meyers, "Vere Homo, The Case for Pictures of Jesus: A Critical Examination of *Seeing Jesus* by Peter Barnes" (unpublished; revised June 1999) 51. Available at http://www.prpc-stl.org/auto_images/1077769417Vere_Homo.pdf.

6. See generally the essays in *Iconoclasm and Iconoclasm*.

Israelite aniconism,⁷ the phenomenon of Eastern Christian iconoclasm leading up to the Seventh Ecumenical Council,⁸ and of course the Reformed (and especially “Puritan”) opposition to the kind of religious imagery that had flourished in medieval Catholicism.⁹

The purpose of the present article is to present and evaluate recent arguments from within the Reformed community in support of (at least limited) use of pictures of Jesus. Since space is tight and summarizing the case of each individual writer or speaker would be tedious, I focus upon the arguments themselves rather than upon individuals’ appropriation of them. Though defenders of the traditional Reformed prohibition of making and using pictures of Jesus have not always made their case in the most compelling manner, I argue that the prohibition is morally sound and the historic arguments by and large on target. Despite the initial plausibility of some of the contemporary arguments in favor of pictures of Jesus, the arguments suffer from significant flaws and do not sufficiently grasp the fundamental genius underlying the traditional Reformed conviction. Its fundamental genius, I believe, is that God is sovereign over his revelation of himself—when, to whom, and how.

I first review the traditional Reformed arguments against the use of pictures of Jesus and offer some initial analysis of their theological impetus. Second I survey contemporary arguments in support of pictures of Jesus. Third I present a brief and unified restatement of the traditional case, utilizing and building upon its great insight concerning God’s sovereignty in revelation. Finally, I offer specific responses in critique of recent defenders of pictures of Christ.

I. THE PROHIBITION OF PICTURES OF JESUS: TRADITIONAL AND CONTEMPORARY ARGUMENTS

Polemics against religious imagery generally, and images of God and the Lord Jesus Christ in particular, span the Reformed tradition. In addition to the work of numerous theologians, many of whom will be cited below, a number of catechisms and confessions place these sentiments in the mouth of the church as a whole. The Heidelberg Catechism, for example, states that we may “in nowise make any image of God,” for “God may not and can not be imaged in any way.” In response to the objection that we might have pictures in church to serve as “books for the laity,” the Heidelberg Catechism responds: “we should not be wiser than God, who will not have his people taught by dumb idols, but by the lively preaching of his Word.”¹⁰ Similarly, chapter 4 of

the Second Helvetic Confession states: “Although Christ assumed human nature, yet he did not on that account assume it in order to provide a model for carvers and painters.” It goes on to assert that images are forbidden by the law and the prophets, which Christ did not come to abolish, and that Christ has promised to be near to us by his Spirit, not bodily. “Who, therefore, would believe that a shadow or likeness of his body would contribute any benefit to the pious?”¹¹ Perhaps most notably, the Westminster Larger Catechism (109) teaches that the second commandment forbids, among other things, “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.” Among twentieth-century Reformed writers specifically defending the traditional position, particularly in regard to pictures of Jesus, were Johannes Vos, J. Marcellus Kik, John Murray, Loraine Boettner, G. I. Williamson, J. I. Packer, and Peter Barnes.¹² All

7. See Trygve N. D. Mettinger, *No Graven Image? Israelite Aniconism in Its Ancient Near Eastern Context* (Stockholm: Almqvist & Wiksell, 1995).

8. E.g., see Ambrosios Giakalis, *Images of the Divine: The Theology of Icons at the Seventh Ecumenical Council* (New York: Brill, 1994). Among other recent discussions of this topic, as part of larger studies, see Jaroslav Pelikan, *Imago Dei: The Byzantine Apologia for Icons* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1990); Charles Barber, *Figure and Likeness: On the Limits of Representation in Byzantine Iconoclasm* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2002); and Besancon, *The Forbidden Image*.

9. E.g., see Sergiusz Michalski, *The Reformation and the Visual Arts: The Protestant Image Question in Western and Eastern Europe* (New York: Routledge, 1993); and Willem J. van Asselt, “The Prohibition of Images and Protestant Identity,” in *Iconoclasm and Iconoclasm*, 299–311. For a closer study of the Puritans, particularly in New England, see Maria Lynn Haims, “The American Puritan Aesthetic: Iconography in Seventeenth-Century Poetry and Tombstone Art” (Ph.D. dissertation, New York University, 1981).

10. See questions and answers 96–98. Translations are taken from *The Creeds of Christendom*, ed. Philip Schaff, vol. 3, 6th ed. (reprinted, Grand Rapids: Baker, 2007) 343.

11. Translation taken from *The Constitution of the Presbyterian Church (U.S.A.)*, Part I, *Book of Confessions* (Louisville: Office of the General Assembly, 1991) 5.020.

12. See Johannes Vos, *The Westminster Larger Catechism: A Commentary*, ed. G. I. Williamson (Phillipsburg, N.J.: P&R, 2002) 291–293 [this was originally published as a series of articles in 1946–49]; J. Marcellus Kik, “Pictures of Christ,” *The Southern Presbyterian Journal* 14 (17 August 1955): 9–11; J. Marcellus Kik, “The Reformed Faith and Worship,” *The Southern Presbyterian Journal* 14 (14 September 1955): 9–12; John Murray, “Pictures of Christ,” *Reformed Herald* 16 (February 1961): 65–66; Loraine Boettner, *Roman Catholicism* (Philadelphia: Presbyterian and Reformed, 1962) 283–284; G. I. Williamson, *The Shorter Catechism*, vol. 2 (Phillipsburg: Presbyterian and Reformed, 1970) 26–30; J. I. Packer, *Knowing God* (Downers Grove: InterVarsity, 1973) 38–44; and Peter Barnes, *Seeing Jesus: The Case Against Pictures of*

of their treatments are rather brief and largely reiterate older arguments. Since the turn of the new century, I have offered a journal article to a mainstream theological audience in defense of the classic prohibition of pictures of Jesus, utilizing some older argumentation and also presenting at least one argument that, to my knowledge, was not developed by earlier Reformed

theologians.¹³ Daniel Hyde has recently written an entire book considering pictures of Jesus that, in my judgment, is the finest Reformed work on the subject in recent memory.¹⁴

The classic Reformed case against pictures of Jesus has centered around the second commandment and its implications. As traditionally understood, the first commandment prohibits worship of any God except the one true God and the second commandment has special concern to prohibit worshiping the true God in ways that he has not authorized.¹⁵ According to Reformed lights, in other words, the sin of idolatry extends not only to creating false deities but also to creating one's own paths for communing with the God of Israel. The second commandment excludes graven images of Jehovah as well as of Baal.¹⁶

Since Reformed discussions of pictures of Jesus have traditionally been embedded within discussions of images of the deity more broadly, in this section I first identify some of the common general arguments against images of God and then discuss the arguments that focus more specifically on pictures of Jesus. I conclude this section by offering some initial analysis of these arguments.

The first general argument is that God is invisible and spiritual and thus images of him simply cannot capture his majestic glory.¹⁷ A second general concern that flows naturally from the first is that images debase and dishonor God, thereby lessening our esteem for him and creating false thoughts about him.¹⁸ Third, many writers make the simple point that there is no biblical command to make such images. Images of the deity lack divine warrant.¹⁹ In regard to this third point it is helpful to remember that the Reformed tradition has typically grounded the *regulative principle of worship* in the second commandment, and has thus seen this commandment as directing believers toward what Scripture positively authorizes (and not merely against what it specifically prohibits). The fourth argument turns inward to the sinful human heart. Fallen human beings are prone toward idolatry, and thus, even

Our Lord Jesus Christ (Edinburgh: Banner of Truth, 1990). For lengthy arguments against pictures of Christ by those outside of Reformed circles, see J. Virgil Dunbar, *Christ Can't Be Pictured: God Is Not Like Art* (Montgomery: Grace Bible Publishers, 1994); and Jerome Christopher Crichton, "A Manual for Church Leaders, to Transform the Consciousness and Practice of the Church as Relates to Divine-Human Image in Art, in Accordance with the Second Commandment" (final document for Doctor of Ministry degree, United Theological Seminary, 1995).

13. David VanDrunen, "Iconoclasm, Incarnation and Eschatology: Toward a Catholic Understanding of the Reformed Doctrine of the 'Second' Commandment," *International Journal of Systematic Theology* 6 (April 2004): 130–147. See also my briefer pieces for a popular audience: David VanDrunen, "Faith Comes By ... Seeing!" *Modern Reformation* 13 (May/June 2004): 8, 15; and "Celebrating Jesus' Birth—Without His Picture," *New Horizons* 27 (December 2006): 6–7.

14. Daniel R. Hyde, *In Living Color: Images of Christ and the Means of Grace* (Grandville, Mich.: Reformed Fellowship, 2009). Another recent book-length treatment is Justin Griffin, *The Truth about Images of Jesus and the 2nd Commandment* (n.p., Tate, 2006).

15. This is clear, for example, from the exposition of the first and second commandments in Heidelberg Catechism 94–98 and Westminster Larger Catechism 103–110.

16. For a recent, brief defense of this basic point, see G. K. Beale, *We Become What We Worship: A Biblical Theology of Idolatry* (Downers Grove: InterVarsity, 2008) 18–19.

17. E.g., see John Calvin, *Sermons on the Ten Commandments*, trans. and ed. Benjamin W. Farley (Grand Rapids: Baker, 1980) 66–67; John Calvin, *Institutes of the Christian Religion*, 1.11.1–2; Francis Turretin, *Institutes of Elenctic Theology*, vol. 2, trans. George Musgrave Giger, ed. James T. Dennison, Jr. (Phillipsburg: P&R, 1994) 63–64; Wilhelmus à Brakel, *The Christian's Reasonable Service*, vol. 3, trans. Bartel Elshout (Pittsburgh: Soli Deo Gloria, 1994) 106; William Ames, *The Marrow of Theology*, trans. John Dykstra Eusden (1968; reprinted Grand Rapids: Baker, 1997) 281; James Durham, *A Practical Exposition of the Ten Commandments*, ed. Christopher Coldwell (Dallas: Naphtali Press, 2002) 92–95; Thomas Watson, *The Ten Commandments* (London: Banner of Truth, 1965) 60–62; Ebenezer Erskine and James Fisher, *The Westminster Assembly's Shorter Catechism Explained* (Glasgow: Gillies and Leith: Coke, 1796) 59; anonymous author, "Is the Church of Rome Idolatrous," *Biblical Repertory and Princeton Review* 26 (April 1854): 261–262; Charles Hodge, *Systematic Theology*, vol. 3 (reprinted, Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1995) 290; Robert L. Dabney, *Systematic Theology* (1871; Edinburgh: Banner of Truth, 1996) 363; Vos, *The Westminster Larger Catechism*, 291; Barnes, *Seeing Jesus*, 2; Michael S. Horton, *The Law of Perfect Freedom* (Chicago: Moody, 1994) 90; J. Douma, *The Ten Commandments*, trans. Nelson D. Kloosterman (Phillipsburg: P&R, 1996) 41–42; and J. V. Fesko, *The Rule of Love: Broken, Fulfilled, and Applied* (Grand Rapids: Reformation Heritage, 2009) 34.

18. E.g., see Thomas Vincent, *An Explicatory Catechism: or, an Explanation of the Assembly's Shorter Catechism* (New Haven: Walter, Austin, and Co., 1810) 121; Erskine and Fisher, *Shorter Catechism Explained*, 60; Packer, *Knowing God*, 41–44; and Barnes, *Seeing Jesus*, 5–6.

19. E.g., see Nicholas Ridley, "A Treatise on the Worship of Images," in *The Works of Nicholas Ridley, D.D., Sometime Lord Bishop of London, Martyr, 1555*, ed., Henry Christmas (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1841) 85–86; George Estey, *Certain Godly and Learned Expositions upon Divers Parts of Scriptures* (London: James Roberts, 1603) 43; Durham, *A Practical Exposition of the Ten Commandments*, 92–93, 103; Watson, *The Ten Commandments*, 61; Dabney, *Systematic Theology*, 361; Murray, "Pictures of Christ," 66. Also see pertinent comments by Edward M. Curtis, "The Theological Basis for the Prohibition of Images in the Old Testament," *JETS* 28 (September 1985) 283–285.

were images of God harmless in themselves, people who have them will tend to use them for worship.²⁰ Fifth, Reformed theologians have connected the use of images with the sinful human desire to control God and to use him for our own purposes, such that we fail to acknowledge his sovereignty. In this connection, some Reformed writers have noted that even the heathen do not ordinarily think that idols *are* their gods. Rather, idols serve as a means for people to access the deity on their own terms and in their own way. Likewise, many Reformed theologians argue that Israel's sin with respect to the golden calves—whether under Aaron at Sinai or under Jereboam at Bethel and Dan—was a violation of the second rather than the first commandment, since they sought to worship YHWH through them. Obviously the Israelites at Sinai did not think that their newly minted golden calf *was* God, since the God they professed to honor was the one who had brought them out of Egypt (Exodus 32:4).²¹ Sixth, Reformed theologians have traditionally viewed the use of images of God as an implicit rejection of the sufficiency of God's verbal revelation and its proclamation. If God has revealed himself sufficiently in Scripture, why the need to portray him visibly?²² Finally, Reformed writers have often appealed to the lack of such images (and religious imagery generally) in early Christianity.²³ This last consideration, of course, is not a constructive theological argument but a piece of corroborating evidence.

Is there a common thread in these general considerations, apart from the last? I believe that there is: a concern about usurping the divine prerogatives. God's nature is spiritual and invisible, unknowable to the world apart from his own sovereign revelation of himself. God initiates and defines his relationship with human beings, but sinful humans wish to be the initiators of the relationship and want to deal with God on their own terms, in their own way and at their own time, rather than adhering steadfastly to his revelation alone. This inevitably distorts their perception of God and destroys their relationship with him. All of the first six general concerns revolve around this central theme.

In addition to the general considerations discussed above, Reformed theologians also turned their attention specifically to images of the Lord Jesus Christ. The same theological impetus is at work here too, but the incarnation of the Second Person of the Godhead raises peculiar questions that a general consideration of divine images does not necessarily face. Five distinct but in some ways interrelated arguments are worth mentioning.

First, many writers have argued that we are ignorant of Jesus' actual appearance, since there are no extant contemporary pictures of him and the New Testament provides no specific description of his features. This means that pictures of him created by artists are not accurate or authentic, being products of their imagination and thus functioning as a species of will-worship.²⁴

20. E.g., see Calvin, *Sermons*, 65–66; Ridley, “A Treatise on the Worship of Images,” 83, 86–87; Estey, *Certain Godly and Learned Expositions*, 43; Ames, *The Marrow of Theology*, 281; Turretin, *Institutes*, vol. 2, 64; Hodge, *Systematic Theology*, vol. 3, 303–305; Murray, “Pictures of Christ,” 66; Kik, “The Reformed Faith and Worship,” 9–12; Kik, “Pictures of Christ,” 9–11; Boettner, *Roman Catholicism*, 281; and Douma, *The Ten Commandments*, 37.

21. For various discussions of related points, see Calvin, *Institutes*, 1.11.1, 9; William Perkins, “A Warning Against the Idolatry of the Last Times and an Instruction Touching Religious or Divine Worship,” in *The workes of that famous and worthy minister of Christ in the Unversite of Cambridge, Mr. William Perkins. The first volume: newly corrected according to his owne copies. With distinct characters, and contents of euery booke, and two tables of the whole: one of the matter and questions, the other of choice places of scripture* (London: Iohn Legatt, 1635) 676, 688–690; à Brakel, *The Christian's Reasonable Service*, vol. 3, 112; Durham, *The Ten Commandments*, 97–100; Erskine and Fisher, *Shorter Catechism Explained*, 61; William S. Plumer, *The Law of God, as Contained in the Ten Commandments, Explained and Enforced* (Philadelphia: Presbyterian Board of Publication, 1864) 206; Dabney, *Systematic Theology*, 363; Packer, *Knowing God*, 40; Geerhardus Vos, *Biblical Theology* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1948) 152–153; Horton, *The Law of Perfect Freedom*, 79–81; Douma, *The Ten Commandments*, 37–41; Richard Lints, “Imaging and Idolatry: The Sociality of Personhood in the Canon,” in *Personal Identity in Theological Perspective*, ed. Richard Lints, Michael S. Horton, and Mark R. Talbot (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 2006) 222; and Fesko, *The Rule of Love*, 34–35.

22. E.g., see Calvin, *Institutes*, 1.11.5; Williamson, *The Shorter Catechism*, 27; Packer, *Knowing God*, 43–44; Barnes, *Seeing Jesus*, 13; Horton, *The Law of Perfect Freedom*, 82–87; and Hyde, *In Living Color*, 18–19, chapter 2.

23. E.g., see Calvin, *Institutes*, 1.11.6, 9, 13; Ridley, “A Treatise on the Worship of Images,” 88–96; Watson, *The Ten Commandments*, 60; Thomas Ridgely, *A Body of Divinity: Wherein the Doctrines of the Christian Religion Are Explained and Defended. Being the Substance of Several Lectures on the Assembly's Larger Catechism*, vol. 3 (Philadelphia: William W. Woodward, 1815) 465; Kik, “Pictures of Christ,” 9–11; Barnes, *Seeing Jesus*, 8–10.

24. E.g., see à Brakel, *The Christian's Reasonable Service*, vol. 3, 109; Durham, *A Practical Exposition of the Ten Commandments*, 96; Robert Parker, *A Scholasticall Discovrse against Symbolizing with Antichrist in Ceremonies: Especially in the Signe of the Crosse* (Middelburg: Richard Schilders, 1607) Book 1, 60; Dabney, *Systematic Theology*, 362; Murray, “Pictures of Christ,” 66; Kik, “The Reformed Faith and Worship,” 9–12; Kik, “Pictures of Christ,” 9–11; Vos, *The Westminster Larger Catechism*, 292; Boettner, *Roman Catholicism*, 27; Williamson, *The Shorter Catechism*, 27; Packer, *Knowing God*, 39; Barnes, *Seeing Jesus*, 3–5; VanDrunen, “Iconoclasm, Incarnation and Eschatology,” 139–142; and Hyde, *In Living Color*, 60–65. This argument is thus much more common in the Reformed tradition than I previously indicated in my article, “Iconoclasm, Incarnation and Eschatology,” 134.

The concern about will-worship is manifest, for example, in the inclination of many artists to portray Jesus as though he were a member of their own ethnic group or according to their own image of ideal humanity.²⁵ A second argument deals with another problem of authenticity. The reality of the incarnation means that the Son's divine nature has become inseparably united to a human nature. When artists seek to portray the human nature they are incapable of portraying the divine nature, so their creations are inevitably not true representations of Christ the God-man.²⁶ Though I return to this argument below, I note here that it can function as either an ontological or a practical-ethical argument.

25. E.g., see Barnes, *Seeing Jesus*, 5; and VanDrunen, "Iconoclasm, Incarnation and Eschatology," 140.

26. E.g., Ridgely, *A Body of Divinity*, 463; William Fulke, *The Text of the New Testament of Iesus Christ, Translated Out of the Vulgar Latine by the Papiſts of the Traiterous Seminarie at Rhemes. With Arguments of Bookes, Chapters, and Annotations, Pretending to Discover the Corruptions of Diuers Translations, and to Cleare the Controuersies of These Dayes. VWhereunto Is Added the Translation Out of the Original Greeke, Commonly Vſed in the Church of England, with a Confutation of All Such Arguments, Glosses, and Annotations, As Conteine Manifest Impietie, of Heresie, Treason and Slander, against the Catholike Church of God, and the True Teachers Thereof, or the Translations Vſed in the Church of England* (London: Christopher Barker, 1589) 224; Durham, *A Practical Exposition*, 95–96; Watson, *The Ten Commandments*, 62; Vincent, *An Explicatory Catechism*, 121; John Owen, "ΧΡΙΣΤΟΛΟΓΙΑ: or, a Declaration of the Glorious Mystery of the Person of Christ," in *The Works of John Owen*, vol. 1, ed. William H. Goold (Edinburgh: Banner of Truth, 1965) 159–160; Erskine and Fisher, *Shorter Catechism Explained*, 60; John Dod and Robert Cleaver, *The Bright Star Which Leadeth Wise Men to Our Lord Iesus Christ, or, A Familiar and Learned Exposition on the Ten Commandments Gathered from the Mouth of a Faithfull Pastor by a Gracious Young Man, Sometime Scholler in Cambridge* (London: Iohn Harison, 1603), cited from the first authorized edition, *A plaine and familiar exposition of the Ten commandments with a methodicall short catechisme, containing briefly all the principall grounds of Christian religion* (London: T. C[reede], 1604) 64–65; Dabney, *Systematic Theology*, 362; Vos, *The Westminster Larger Catechism*, 292; Kik, "The Reformed Faith and Worship," 9–11; Kik, "Pictures of Christ," 9–12; Boettner, *Roman Catholicism*, 284; Williamson, *The Shorter Catechism*, 27; Barnes, *Seeing Jesus*, 6–8.

27. In this ontological sense I rejected the argument in "Iconoclasm, Incarnation and Eschatology," 139, though in hindsight I believe that I significantly understated the degree to which previous Reformed theologians wrestled with the second commandment in light of the incarnation and did adopt reasoning that resembled the eighteenth-century iconoclasts.

28. See Vincent, *An Explicatory Catechism*, 121–122; and Durham, *A Practical Exposition*, 96.

29. For discussions related to pictures of Jesus and the sacraments, see, e.g., Calvin, *Institutes*, 1.11.13; Horton, *The Perfect Law of Freedom*, 92; VanDrunen, "Iconoclasm, Incarnation and Eschatology," 146–147; Hyde, *In Living Color*, chapter 3; and Fesko, *The Rule of Love*, 38–39.

30. VanDrunen, "Iconoclasm, Incarnation and Eschatology," 142–145. Hyde has picked up this argument effectively; see *In Living Color*, 65–69.

As an ontological argument—namely, that visual representations of a person have to convey attributes that are inherently invisible, or else be false—it seems quite weak.²⁷ But as a practical-ethical argument—namely, that any encounter with the human nature of Jesus demands a reckoning with his identity as the Son of God and thus evokes worship—it is rather powerful. When presented as a practical-ethical argument it merges into a third argument: a person confronted by a picture of Christ is faced with an impossible dilemma. If he worships it he overtly violates the second commandment, but if he refuses to worship it and thus treats it like any common picture, then making the picture is "in vain" or even "wrongs Christ."²⁸ Fourth, Reformed theologians have argued that making images of Jesus compromises the sufficiency of Scripture and its preaching, especially in light of the new covenant emphasis upon preaching as a means of grace. For many of these theologians the new covenant sacraments also demand a negative evaluation of images of Christ. In the Lord's Supper specifically God has visibly and physically revealed the Lord Jesus to his people, thus leaving them without the need to represent him in other visible ways.²⁹ Finally, I have attempted to develop a redemptive-historical or eschatological argument to supplement and extend some of these other arguments. In the fullness of time God did reveal himself visibly, definitively, and uniquely in the incarnation of his Son. The Lord Jesus Christ, ontologically speaking, could be seen, and even could have been drawn or photographed like another human being. But the present age between his ascension and second coming is not the age for seeing, but an age of suffering in which we know him by faith, through the presence of the Spirit, the hearing of the word, and participation in the sacraments. The glorious day is coming when we will see him face to face, but until that day we should not force the eschatological calendar ahead of schedule by trying to make Jesus visible in our own way.³⁰

Is there a common thread in these sentiments? Here too I believe that there is, and again it revolves around the sin of usurping God's prerogatives in the revelation of himself. God has revealed himself concretely in the incarnation of Christ, and pictures of Jesus can do justice neither to the human nature itself (in terms of accuracy) nor to the relation between the natures. Thus people seeking to depict Jesus visibly must turn to their own imagination to construct something that must either be treated as any other image (a Jesus who is not worshiped) or be used to foster divine worship (an obvious violation of the second commandment). It betrays discontentment with what God *has* given to us

in revelation, in the word and sacraments, and doubt about their sufficiency. Making pictures of Jesus fails to recognize or submit to God's inscrutable wisdom in requiring his people to live for a time by faith and not by sight as they wait patiently for the day when God will make himself fully visible to them through the true and authentic face of Christ. Receiving the Christ who is revealed (and in the way that he is revealed) rather than seeking to make Christ visible in our own way during his present absence, is at the heart of historic and contemporary Reformed concerns about portraying Jesus.

II. THE CONTEMPORARY CASE FOR PICTURES OF CHRIST

Anecdotally it seems obvious that pictures of Jesus are common today among Reformed Christians. Some older Reformed theologians entertained rather lenient views on pictures of Christ,³¹ but in recent years this line of thought has gained unusual momentum. A number of writers within Reformed circles have called for reconsideration of the traditional Reformed prohibition and in certain cases have presented rather enthusiastic defense of such pictures. To the extent that Reformed confession and Reformed practice seem to have increasingly diverged on this issue, the concern to realign our doctrine and life is certainly to be appreciated. But is it time to throw out our historic doctrinal position on images of Christ and to acknowledge the propriety of—and perhaps even encourage—the use of such images as is already common in the pedagogy, art, and personal piety of many in the Reformed community? In this section I first identify some of the people who have advanced an affirmative answer to this question. Then I provide a summary and initial analysis of their arguments.

In 1974 Donald Weilersbacher penned a short article in a symposium published by the Reformed Presbyterian Church of North America. Weilersbacher raised problems that he perceived with the traditional prohibition of pictures of Jesus and called for the RPCNA to clarify its interpretation of WLC 109 in light of the church's confusion about the issue.³² To my knowledge his plea was not heeded. In 1981 a special committee of the Reformed Presbyterian Church, Evangelical Synod presented a report concluding that the absolute prohibition of representations of God in WLC 109 is not justified, on grounds of the second commandment or otherwise. This report argued that certain kinds of representations of Jesus are permissible and to be encouraged.³³ The RPCES merged with the Presbyterian

Church in America shortly thereafter, however, and no changes to WLC 109 were ever adopted. In subsequent years a number of writers from various locations within the Reformed community have articulated concerns similar to those of Weilersbacher and the RPCES special committee. The longest study is an unpublished manuscript by PCA pastor Jeffrey Meyers.³⁴ Several prominent writers address the issue briefly as part of broader considerations of the second commandment. Among them, Edmund Clowney and John Frame specifically argue for the permissibility of some visible representations of Christ and J. Douma does so implicitly.³⁵ Greg Bahnsen and Kenneth Gentry have taken similar positions to those mentioned above in publicly accessible lectures or sermons.³⁶ An enthusiastic review of the film

31. E.g., Andrew Willet is tolerant of portrayals of Christ "only historically," though he still warns strongly against portraying his "personal countenance, which cannot be but dangerous and offensive." See *Synopsis Papismi; or, a General View of the Papacy: with Confutations of Romish Errors from the Scriptures, Fathers, Councils, etc. etc.*, new edition (London: The British Society for Promoting the Religious Principles of the Reformation, 1852) 208–209. Another prominent example is William Perkins, who permits pictures of Christ so long as people remember that such pictures are only of his human nature and do not use them for "use of religion." Later he comments that the painting of the history of the Bible, "though otherwise lawful in itself, is not expedient in Churches: because danger of Idolatry may rise hence." See Perkins, "A Warning," 677.

32. Donald Weilersbacher, "Implications of Exodus 20:3–6 for the Doctrine of Worship," in *The Biblical Doctrine of Worship: A Symposium to state and clarify the Scriptural teachings concerning worship with emphasis on the use of the biblical Psalms in Christian Worship* (n.p.: Reformed Presbyterian Church of North America, 1974) 19–22.

33. "Report of the Special Committee of Synod on Pictures of Christ," in *Documents of the Synod: Study Papers and Actions of the Reformed Presbyterian Church, Evangelical Synod—1965–1982* (Lookout Mountain, Tenn.: The Synod, n.d.) 332–350.

34. Meyers, "Vere Homo, The Case for Pictures of Jesus: A Critical Examination of *Seeing Jesus* by Peter Barnes."

35. See Edmund P. Clowney, *How Jesus Transforms the Ten Commandments* (Phillipsburg: P&R, 2007) 26–32; John M. Frame, *The Doctrine of the Christian Life* (Phillipsburg: P&R, 2008) 453–459; and Douma, *The Ten Commandments*, 66. I refer to Douma's position as implicit because though he never explicitly defends visible representations of Christ he makes the following comments about a "smooth, polished, saccharine portrait of Christ:" "Since this kind of portrait of Christ is controversial, people should not put it in a church. Representations of Christ are numerous. You should compare the subdued portrayals of the suffering Christ with the tearful expressions so often portrayed in religious art. Nevertheless, it would be good if both remained outside the church building."

36. Greg L. Bahnsen, "Book II: Chapter 8, 9, 10," Lecture 33 of *Calvin's Institutes*, Covenant Media Foundation. MP3, GB438. Kenneth L. Gentry, Jr., "Christmas and the Second Commandment," Sermon one of *Christmas and Christ*, KennethGentry.com. Bahnsen addresses the subject generally beginning at 16:11, and begins the topic of pictures of Christ specifically at about the 20 minute mark. Gentry addresses

The Passion of the Christ appearing in the web magazine of the PCA has also expressed these views.³⁷ Though not a large body of literature, this material challenges

the issue at length. At the 4:50 time mark, he begins speaking of nativity scenes and portrayals of Christ. At 5:20, Larger Catechism 109 is referenced. At 6:14, he makes reference specifically to the second commandment and representation of God by images, and then expounds the commandment with respect to images of God proper. At 19:00, Gentry returns to the subject of Christ and nativity scenes, and at 20:30 he declares his position in brief. The first main sub-section begins at 23:10, where he contends that pictures of Jesus Christ are not pictures of God proper, but representations of God's human body, and as such are not violations of the second commandment. At 31:45, a second sub-section begins which contends man is not making images of Christ—God did that—rather, men who make such pictures are just remembering what God has done. At 34:20, a third sub-section covering LC 109 begins, wherein, presuming on his first point, Gentry contends LC 109 only says no images are to be made of the second person of the Trinity. He claims his view respects LC 109, because the images are made only of the body of Christ, not the second person. At 39:00, a fourth sub-section contends the Christian faith should encourage art, and Calvin is cited in support (again, presuming on his first sub-section point).

37. See Brian Godawa, review of "The Passion of the Christ," from <http://www.alliancenet.org/CC/article/o,,PTID23682|CHID125099|CIID1712182,00.html> (accessed June 9, 2009).

38. E.g., see "The Report of the Special Committee," 345–346; Meyers, "Vere Homo," 1–2, 22, 73–75; Godawa, "The Passion of the Christ;" and Clowney, *How Jesus Transforms the Ten Commandments*, 31–32. See also the comments in John K. La Shell, "Imagination and Idol: A Puritan Tension," *Westminster Theological Journal* 49 (Fall 1987): 332–333.

39. Gentry says, "An accurate reading of the Larger Catechism 109 will show I believe that it's technically correct—although it may not have been intended to do this—I believe that it is technically correct and a proper interpretation of it will lead to a different conclusion than some have held." Gentry, 34:24–34:43. On Gentry's contention that a technical reading of LC 109 supports his position on the lawfulness of pictures of Christ's humanity, see the brief article provided by the editor following this one.

40. See Gentry, 34:10; Meyers, "Vere Homo," chapter 7; "Report of the Special Committee," 336–337.

41. For arguments in favor of this restricted reading of the second commandment, see, e.g., "Report of the Special Committee," 344; Meyers, "Vere Homo," 2, 12–16, 35–37; Frame, *The Doctrine of the Christian Life*, 453–454, 459; and Bahnsen, 20.00. I also note briefly that the RPCES report insists that the second commandment only pertains to three-dimensional objects; see "Report of the Special Committee," 337–338, 343–344. This also has significant ramifications for debates about pictures of Christ, since the sorts of pictures that contemporary Reformed people defend are uniformly two-dimensional. In my judgment, the RPCES report fails to make its case. Even if the terminology of the second commandment refers to three-dimensional objects, it is not clear that Scripture uses this language *over against* two-dimensional objects, as if to say "you shall not make three-dimensional graven images [but two-dimensional graven images are fine]." The report fails to show why this reading is preferable to a reading that applies the principle underlying the prohibition of three-dimensional images to two-dimensional images as well.

an aspect of the Reformed confessional heritage from within, and those who embrace this heritage should take it seriously.

It is important to note what kind of pictures of Jesus these writers attempt to defend. Many of them specifically say that pictures depicting Jesus in the midst of historical narratives recorded in the Gospels, used for pedagogical purposes, are permissible, while attempts to create a portrait of Jesus, abstracted from historical setting, remain problematic. Contextless portraits, they reason, are in fact imaginative exercises that compromise the self-revelation of God and seem designed to mediate God's presence in worship rather than to serve the needs of pedagogy.³⁸

The works cited in the previous paragraphs make arguments in distinctive ways, but work with an overlapping set of concerns. In what follows I identify five related claims that, taken together, constitute the contemporary case for a revised Reformed understanding of pictures of Christ.

The first claim involves a revised reading of history. This is not a constructive theological argument, but as the defenders of the traditional prohibition have often bolstered their case through historical appeal, so those challenging the prohibition have questioned whether the weight of history lies only on one side. For example, Gentry claims that WLC 109 technically does not prohibit pictures of Jesus (since such pictures represent only his human nature and do not represent God³⁹), Meyers cites evidence that the early Reformed tradition was open to pictures of Christ for non-worship purposes, and the RPCES report describes WLC 109 as a bit of an (understandable) overreaction to a thousand years of abuse of religious imagery.⁴⁰ All together, such claims make Reformed history seem somewhat more complicated than traditional defenders of WLC 109 would have us imagine.

A second claim concerns interpretation of the second commandment itself. A number of writers argue that the second commandment has a more limited scope than traditionally understood: it only pertains to *worship*. In other words, the second commandment has no interest in the existence of religious images per se but only in prohibiting those which are *made* in order that people might *bow down and serve* them. This is a strategically important claim. Reformed theologians have traditionally defended the prohibition of pictures of Christ as an application of the second commandment. Restricting the commandment's applicability, therefore, undermines the rationale of confessional statements such as WLC 109 and creates space for making and utilizing representations of Christ provided that they are not used for worship.⁴¹

A third claim among contemporary defenders of pictures of Christ is that traditional arguments based upon the authenticity problem are seriously flawed. Meyers in particular skewers Barnes for his claim that because we do not know what Jesus looked like any attempt to portray him must be false. This radically misconceives the purpose of artistic representation, says Meyers. Artists do not seek to create exact reproductions of what they are portraying but draw upon their powers of imagination and interpretation, and this does not make their artistic products untrue. According to Barnes' requirements, he states, producing an authentic picture of Christ demands not simply *some* biblical description of Christ's appearance but an exhaustive description. In fact, Barnes' requirements make artistic representation of any sort false.⁴² Furthermore, defenders of pictures of Christ reject the assertion that the inability to depict his divine nature means that all portrayals of him separate his natures in Nestorian fashion and are therefore untrue. Since his human appearance was just like anyone else's, and the divine nature is inherently uncircumscribable, to demand that representations of Jesus must somehow depict his divinity is unjustified. To portray Jesus as simply a man, as the people of his day saw him, is not guilty of separating his natures.⁴³

The fourth claim is the most common and often the most strongly asserted: forbidding pictures of Jesus suggests unease with the fact that Jesus had a true human body and sends Docetic vibes to the people (especially the children) of our churches. If our children constantly see pictures of Jesus' disciples and other biblical figures in their Sunday School classes and story books, but Jesus is always absent in the pictures even when he was present in the historical event depicted, what does this communicate except that they are not to think of Jesus as having a real human frame? For some writers, therefore, pictures of Jesus are not only permissible but even desirable, and serve as a confession of the incarnation.⁴⁴ Proponents of pictures seem chiefly concerned about pedagogy and art in the context of a material world that is inherently good. Forbidding pictures of Christ inhibits effective teaching about Jesus' physical human nature and squelches the flourishing of Christians' artistic talent.⁴⁵

The fifth claim addresses the subject of mental images. Many traditional Reformed discussions of the second commandment have clearly taught that it prohibits forming mental images of God as well as representing him artistically. Both entail the triumph of human imagination over submission to divine revelation and thus produce images of the divine that are necessarily

false. Often these discussions focus upon images of God generally. They critique, for example, mental pictures of God as an old man sitting in the sky.⁴⁶ In other cases, Reformed writers address mental images of Jesus specifically.⁴⁷ The prohibition against forming any mental image of Christ is admittedly a difficult position to defend, and proponents of pictures of Jesus exploit their opponents' difficulty with great aplomb. For many of them the reality of human psychology is simply incompatible with forbidding mental images of Christ. When people read the Gospel accounts or hear a minister preach about events of Jesus' life, their minds inevitably and naturally form images of him. The proponents of pictures of Jesus are actually not quite unified on whether this is strictly inevitable. According to Weilersbach, for example, forming mental images of Christ happens "automatically" and Meyers says that it "surely" happens. Frame, on the other hand, asserts that it is psychologically impossible for "most" people not to form images (not specifying whether this means, say, 60% or 99% of people).⁴⁸ How they have come to such conclusions is

42. See Meyers, "Vere Homo," chapters 3–4.

43. E.g., see "Report of the Special Committee," 345; and Meyers, "Vere Homo," 34–55.

44. Nearly every contemporary defender of pictures of Christ makes this general point concerning Docetism, though they do so with differing degrees of confidence and various sentiments about whether such pictures should actually be encouraged. See Clowney, *How Jesus Transforms the Ten Commandments*, 31; Frame, *The Doctrine of the Christian Life*, 459–460; "Report of the Special Committee," 346; Meyers, "Vere Homo," 9, 55–56; Godawa, "The Passion of the Christ," Gentry, 23:50ff, 40:10ff; Bahnsen, 20:00.

45. In regard to the demands of pedagogy, see, e.g., "Report of the Special Committee," 347; and Meyers, 1, 15. In regard to art, see "Report of the Special Committee," 347; Meyers, "Vere Homo," 1, 15, 47; and Gentry, 40:10ff. For related reflections on art and worship, without special attention to pictures of Jesus, see Harry Boonstra, "Of Images and Image Breakers," *Calvin Theological Journal* 32 (November 1997): 430–431.

46. E.g., see Perkins, "A Warning, 686; à Brakel, *The Christian's Reasonable Service*, vol. 3, 115–116; Vincent, *An Explicatory Catechism*, 121; Erskine and Fisher, *Shorter Catechism Explained*, 60; Plumer, *The Law of God*, 212; and Packer, *Knowing God*, 42.

47. E.g., in the debate between James Robe and Ralph Erskine in the eighteenth century, which culminated in Erskine's large volume polemicizing against mental images of Christ, *Faith no Fancy: Or, a Treatise of Mental Images, Discovering the Vain Philosophy and Vile Divinity of a Late Pamphlet Intituled, Mr. Robe's Fourth Letter to Mr. Fisher* (1745; Philadelphia: William M'Culloch, 1805). For discussion and analysis of the Robe-Erskine debate, see John K. La Shell, "Imaginary Ideas of Christ: A Scottish-American Debate" (Ph.D. dissertation, Westminster Theological Seminary, 1985); a shorter version of some of this material appears in La Shell, "Imagination and Idol," 305–334.

48. See Weilersbach, "Implications of Exodus 20:3–6," 22; "Report of the Special Committee," 347; Frame, *The Doctrine of the Christian Life*, 459–460; Meyers, "Vere Homo," 17, 29–30, 39–41.

not clear. They cite no Scripture for proof, nor do they offer social scientific studies to back their claims. Maybe they believe that it is simply common knowledge. One speaker states that the mind naturally thinks of Jesus as a baby or as hanging on a cross when certain biblical stories are read, and then says to his audience: “you know it does” (Gentry, 37:00).

This is another strategic issue. As defenders of the traditional Reformed position have reasoned from the impermissibility of visual images to the impermissibility of mental images, so gainsayers of this position have reasoned from the inevitability (read: permissibility) of mental images to the permissibility of visual images. From a broader perspective, if the foolishness of prohibiting mental images can be established, and thus one aspect of WLC 109 and the earlier tradition cast into disrepute, then the case for reexamining the larger issue is strengthened.

The six claims that I have identified in this section could undoubtedly be parsed and categorized in different ways. Though not every person defending pictures of Jesus makes recourse to each claim individually, all of these claims have garnered widespread approval and together, I believe, they constitute a fair summary of the internal Reformed case in favor of such pictures. What drives this case and distinguishes its impetus from the reasoning behind the traditional Reformed prohibition? All in all, I believe that it turns attention away from (while still theologically affirming) the divine sovereignty over revelation and the obligation of human beings to submit to that revelation, and puts in its place a new emphasis on the fertility of the human imagination and the goodness of the material world, a world into which Jesus has become incarnate and as such can be and (in some cases) should be portrayed in order to confess his humanity and to ingrain a robust incarnational theology into the lives of those being instructed in the Christian faith. While the two sides affirm both God’s sovereignty in revelation and the wonderful doctrine of the incarnation, they clearly do not agree about the bearing of these doctrines upon one another. A key issue that lies before us, then, is determining whether and how the second commandment and its demand to deal with God according to his own revelation and not according to our own imagination have been refracted and transformed through the stupendous historical acts of the Lord Jesus Christ.

III. A CASE AGAINST PICTURES

In this section I present a brief, reconstructed case for the traditional Reformed prohibition of pictures of Jesus. I argue that the sovereign divine prerogative in revelation, established in the second commandment, continues to apply under the new covenant and provides the central reason why Christians should not make or use visual representations of Christ. Though I will engage critics of this position implicitly throughout, I save most of my specific critiques of their arguments for the next section.

Interpretation of the second commandment is obviously crucial for both the traditional Reformed position and contemporary critiques of it. In this commandment the Lord first tells Israel not to “make” graven images (Exodus 20:4) and then adds that they should not “bow down to them or worship them” (20:5).⁴⁹ What exactly is prohibited here? Though the commandment is stated generally, interpreters ordinarily understand that artistic work per se is not in view. The very words of the commandment indicate that images meant to represent *God* (or false gods) are the concern, for the images prohibited are those that might be worshiped and hence provoke the Lord’s jealous wrath. No one is tempted to bow down to images which he regards as having no connection with the divine, and there is no reason to think that such images would arouse divine jealousy. Deuteronomy 4:15–24, clearly an inspired commentary and expansion on the second commandment, confirms this point. God reminds the people that they “saw no form of any kind” at Sinai and that therefore they should not make an image of any shape (4:15–18). The concern is that someone might think of God and proceed to make an image in the form of a creature. Pondering a bird and then drawing a bird is not the problem. Pondering God and then drawing a bird is.

The relationship between making an image and worshiping an image in the second commandment is an interesting issue. On the one hand, in Exodus 20:4 making images is prohibited distinctly from bowing down and worshiping them. The same is true in Deuteronomy 4:15–18, which makes perfect sense without any specific reference to worship. Yet the whole thrust of the second commandment as well as Deuteronomy 4:15–24 points to acts of worship ineluctably. These texts do not give the impression that two separate and potentially unrelated laws are set before the people. The making and the worshiping, though distinct acts, are evidently aspects of a unified sin. Traditional Reformed expositions of the second commandment often grasped this

49. Scripture citations are taken from the New International Version.

point very profoundly. Reformed theologians have frequently spoken of the sinful human tendency toward idolatry. Images that may have been made with the best of intentions become objects which we worship or through which we worship. These theologians, I believe, were thinking along the right lines. In linking the manufacture of images with their worship, the second commandment does not say that making images is fine as long as we do not worship them. It indicates instead that making images and using them for worship are inextricably linked, and it cuts off the latter at the pass by forbidding the former as well. It is not as though making pornography is acceptable as long as a person does not use it for lustful purposes. Making pornography and using it for lustful purposes are inextricably linked and both should be avoided. The same is true with images under the second commandment.

Considering Deuteronomy 4:15–24 further, in its broader context, is helpful for interpreting and applying the second commandment. Deuteronomy contains a short statement that in many ways sums up the whole book and even the whole theological enterprise and the heart of religious devotion: “The secret things belong to the Lord our God, but the things revealed belong to us and to our children forever, that we may follow all the words of this law” (29:29). God is infinite and therefore there are, theoretically, an infinite number of things to know about him. What we human beings do know about him, however, are the things that he has revealed, and these are the things that concern us. The task of our theology and practice is not to speculate about matters that may be true and good, but to affirm things that we know are true and to do things that we know are good because God has revealed them as such. Deuteronomy 4, though falling twenty-five chapters before this pithy and profound statement, is very much an exposition of its principle. Deuteronomy 4 begins: “Hear now, O Israel, the decrees and laws I am about to teach you.... Do not add to what I command you and do not subtract from it, but keep the commands of the Lord your God that I give you” (4:1–2). These commands, the ones taught by God through Moses, are to be followed (4:5) and observed (4:6). Shortly thereafter, Moses reminds them of the meeting between God and his people at Sinai (4:10–11). God spoke to them and they heard the sound of his words, though they saw no form. He declared his covenant, wrote his ten commandments on stone tablets, and directed Moses to teach them to the people (4:12–14). They in turn were to teach these things to their children (4:9–10).

Though Moses may not have put it this way if asked,

Deuteronomy 4 has a subtext, and it is Deuteronomy 29:29. Deuteronomy 4 reminds them that God did *not* reveal his form, so they should not act as though he did and try somehow to represent it by means of images. God’s form and its visual representation are secret things that belong to him, and the people should leave such things alone. Moses emphasizes that God *did* reveal his law and thus the people should be diligent in observing it. God’s commands are not secret things but revealed things, and thus these must be their concern. They should neither add to nor subtract from it. Undoubtedly their imaginations could have concocted fascinating images of God and compelling elaborations on his law, but their wisdom would be shown not by such imaginative activity but by obeying what they received (4:6). It is worth noting that a speculative ontology is not at issue, but the concrete covenantal relationship between God and his people (see 4:13). Perhaps God does have a form and perhaps he could have given them other profitable laws, but the point is that Israel was to adhere to the terms of the covenant *as God revealed them*, adding and subtracting nothing to them.

Also worth noting in Deuteronomy 4 is the intimate covenantal connection among revelation, teaching, and worship. God reveals his law (but not his form), Moses is then to teach it to the people, the people are then to teach it to their children, and this should result in reverence for God (4:10) and rejection of making and worshiping images (4:19, 23, 28). In this interconnected chain, the covenantal revelation determines the nature of the pedagogy, and the pedagogy determines the nature of the worship. God’s revelation is *verbal* rather than *visual* (4:12–13), the teaching is verbal rather than visual (4:1, 5, 9, 14), and the worship is to be offered without visual props (4:15–19, 23–28). There are two significant implications for present purposes. First, teaching cannot be separated from worship. Teaching about God and his law ought to provoke proper worship as a response. Second, the teaching of children apparently did not require pictures (as “books for the laity,” to borrow from the Heidelberg Catechism). Parents were to instruct their children by communicating the *words* of Moses.

Under the new covenant much is exactly the same, and significantly so. The church is to adhere to and teach the word of God, and that alone. Her teachers are not to *add* the word of man to the word of God, in contrast to the Jewish authorities in Jesus’ day (Matthew 15:9) and to the troublers of the church in Paul’s day (Colossians 2:20–23). Neither are they to subtract anything from the word in their teaching, but must proclaim the whole

counsel of God (Acts 20:25–28). Ministers’ teaching is judged by its fidelity in handling the word (2 Timothy 2:15). The canon concludes with a warning like Deuteronomy’s about anyone adding to or subtracting from the word (Revelation 22:18–19). Undoubtedly there is so much that God might have revealed but did not (or did reveal to some but did not wish to preserve for all, such as Paul’s epistle to the Laodiceans—Colossians 4:16), but that is not our concern. What has been revealed is to be believed, obeyed, and taught. In teaching the word of God accuracy is of highest importance. Of course people must interpret the Scriptures and use their God-given creativity in organizing and explaining material, but it is all in the service of communicating what Scripture says and refusing to say what it does not.⁵⁰

What is different about the new covenant (in comparison to the old covenant at Sinai) is that God initially revealed both his word *and his form*. Jesus delivered the initial new covenant revelation in person. Not only did he speak the word of God but his visual appearance itself was also special revelation. Because “in Christ all the fullness of the Deity lives in bodily form” (Colossians 2:9), Jesus could say to his disciples: “Anyone who has seen me has seen the Father” (John 14:9). (Presumably Jesus’ bodily appearance revealed the Godhead only as accompanied with the revelatory words he spoke, since there was nothing inherently distinctive about his appearance—Isaiah 53:2). Jesus delivered this direct, personal revelation to his disciples and others who saw and heard him. The proper response was to receive it in faith and to come to the Father through him (see John 14:6–7).

It is crucial to recognize, however, that we today have not had this same revelatory experience. We have received no verbal or visual revelation directly from Jesus himself. God wills to give us a share in Christ and his salvation, but only through the mediation of the apostles’ ministry, which is itself divine revelation. Christ revealed

himself directly to his apostles and commissioned them to pass along revelation to us (see John 15:26–27; 1 Corinthians 15:3; Hebrews 2:3; 1 John 1:1–3). What Christ commissioned them to do specifically was to *proclaim* the message of Jesus and his work. They received both verbal and visual revelation, but Jesus only commanded them to provide verbal revelation to us. The Spirit enabled them to produce inspired Scriptures, not inspired pictures. Peter was an eyewitness of Jesus’ majesty on the Mount of Transfiguration (2 Peter 1:17), but he pointed the church to “the word of the prophets” as the lamp in a dark place to which they should “pay attention” (2 Peter 1:19).⁵¹ This hardly meant that the incarnation was unimportant to them, as the Apostle John’s epistles exemplify. The antichrist is the person who denies that Jesus came in the flesh (2 John 7)—the incarnation was obviously of no small importance! But how was John as an apostle to communicate this to the next generations? “That which was from the beginning, which *we have heard*, which *we have seen with our eyes*, which *we have looked at* and *our hands have touched*—this we **proclaim** concerning the Word of life. The life appeared; *we have seen* it and **testify** to it, and we **proclaim to you** the eternal life, which was with the Father and has *appeared to us*. We **proclaim to you** what *we have seen and heard*, so that you also may have fellowship with us” (1 John 1:1–3). In other words, John and the apostles received visual as well as verbal revelation, and they testified to it by *proclamation*.

Where does this leave us today? We live in the age after the ascension, and we must reckon with the *absence* of Christ.⁵² The apostolic testimony therefore defines us as people who do not see Jesus—yet. We live now as pilgrims under the cross rather than according to the glory of the new Jerusalem. The apostles saw Jesus, and one day we will see him too, but that time has not yet come. Until then we seek Christ’s presence in the way that he has ordained: by the Holy Spirit working through word and sacrament. We listen to the word, have it confirmed to our sight and touch in the sacraments, and respond with faith and worship. “We live by faith, not by sight” (2 Corinthians 5:7). “Though you have not seen him, you love him; and even though you do not see him *now*, you believe in him and are filled with an inexpressible and glorious joy” (1 Peter 1:8). The visual appearance of Christ that we await is truly a glorious expectation for those who have believed now. On that day Christ will “be marveled at among all those who have believed” (2 Thessalonians 1:10). “When he appears, we shall be like him, for we shall see him as he is” (1 John 3:2). The new heaven and new earth will come down out of heaven from God, and *then* “they will see his face” (Revelation

50. As an aside, perhaps the contemporary Reformed community has a harder time with the prohibition of pictures of Jesus because the whole idea of the church’s *ministerial* authority is so often obscured as people look to their pastors to opine about all sorts of things that go beyond the bounds of Scripture under the guise of application and relevance.

51. According to the Gospel accounts, Peter originally wanted to preserve the transfigured vision of Jesus by building tents in which Jesus, Moses, and Elijah could stay. But the transfiguration was only a sneak preview of the consummation, and Jesus proceeded to call them to a time of suffering rather than further seeing.

52. For very helpful discussion of the theme of Christ’s absence, see Michael S. Horton, *People and Place: A Covenant Ecclesiology* (Louisville: Westminster John Knox, 2008) chapter 1. Horton picks up on the work of Douglas Farrow in *Ascension and Ecclesia* (Edinburgh: T&T Clark, 1999).

22:4). Truly “blessed are those who have not seen and yet have believed” (John 20:29).

Insofar as we have not seen the form, we are in the same basic position as the Israelites at Sinai. God did not reveal his form on Sinai and thus they were not to make an image to represent him. At the moment God has not revealed his form to us New Testament believers either, though we rejoice that we have heard and believed the message that his form was revealed in Jesus Christ and will be revealed again on the last day. Until then we should not make images to represent him. We believe, obey, and teach the revelation that has been given us, and do not meddle with what has not. Israelite parents did not need pictures to teach their children; the apostles who actually saw the form did not need pictures to teach the church; New Testament Christians, who have never seen the form, do not need pictures to teach their children. The revelation that God has given is sufficient. By the word and sacraments the church teaches the flock, including the children, that they are pilgrims who do not now see but wait eagerly for the day they will.

IV. A RESPONSE TO DEFENDERS OF PICTURES OF JESUS

In this final section I offer brief responses to the major arguments utilized in defense of pictures of Jesus by those within the Reformed community. The previous section emphasized the importance of God’s sovereign prerogatives in revelation, and this theme continues to play a significant role in the critique that follows.

The first point of response concerns the scope of the second commandment itself. As noted above, some defenders of pictures of Jesus seek to establish a fairly limited scope for this commandment, namely, that it does not have to do with making images per se but only images made for worship purposes. Narrowly stated this claim seems true. As I argued, however, the second commandment, as unpacked in Deuteronomy 4, does not communicate that some images are bad (those used for worship) and some are acceptable (those not used for worship). Rather, it communicates that making and worshiping images are intimately connected and that if we wish to avoid the latter we should avoid the former as well. The idea that people might make images of the divine for wholesome purposes that have nothing to do with worship is entirely absent in Scripture. For what other purposes might they be made? Defenders of pictures of Christ point to *education*. But is it really possible to separate education about God and his covenant from worship? In Deuteronomy 4 the teaching of God’s

revelation was to provoke certain sorts of worship and inhibit other sorts. To confront people with the true God and the terms of his covenant is to provoke a response to him. If we are truly confronting people (including children) with God and his covenant by means of pictures then how can those pictures not elicit acts of worship?⁵³ As I concluded from Deuteronomy 4 in the previous section, pedagogy and worship are inseparable. Murray is certainly correct to write: “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” (Murray, “Pictures of Christ,” 66).

This point leads to a second response. Defenders of pictures of Christ object to traditional arguments that their position is inherently Nestorian (insofar as pictures are unable to communicate Jesus’ deity and hence they separate his human and divine natures). I suggested above that if the traditional argument is understood in an ontological sense it is not very effective. Scripture indicates that there was nothing distinctive about Jesus’ outward appearance. No one could have picked him out of a police lineup as the eternal Son of God. He could have been photographed or drawn and the product would have naturally and necessarily portrayed ordinary human features. But if this argument is presented in a practical/ethical sense—that is, in a biblical covenantal framework—it is a compelling implication of the second commandment. The more that defenders of pictures of Jesus emphasize that pedagogical pictures represent only his human nature and that this is fine, the more uneasy readers should feel. We must remember that Jesus’ human nature *reveals the divine*, and that the purpose of teaching about Jesus’ human nature and human action is to present God himself to the learners. Defenders of pictures insist that their pedagogical tools present Jesus’ human nature and this *alone*, and they must warn their students that they should not behold the divine in the Jesus they see. Could this possibly be the way that the church should teach about Christ? Our pedagogy about Christ is *supposed* to evoke faith and worship in him. Word and sacraments do this, by divine appointment. Visual representation of Christ’s human nature alone cannot and should not do this. And if they cannot do this, they are terrible teaching tools.

My third response is to the claim that our lack of

53. And if they do elicit acts of worship, they seem thereby to violate Meyers’ own concern: “Anytime an image or picture of anything is used as a *medium* through which to *communicate with* or *worship* God, such an image becomes a graven image and falls under the prohibition of the second commandment.” See “Vere Homo,” 2.

knowledge about Jesus' human appearance is no reason not to make pictures of him. Defenders of pictures have made much of this point, at times strongly critiquing traditionalists for naivete about art. Artistic representation always involves the artist's imagination, they say, and hence the concern about authenticity and accuracy in portraying Christ is misplaced. We must beware of false starts on this issue. Clearly it is true that art entails imagination. An artist could paint a picture of me in all sorts of different ways that I would regard as authentic representations of my appearance. Of course, there are limits. If an artist claimed to draw me and the picture looked like Tiger Woods or Margaret Thatcher, the fact that all three of us have ordinary human features such as two eyes, ears, and arms would not stop me from judging it a misrepresentation. So if a person knew what Jesus looked like he could certainly draw a picture of him in many different ways that could be considered authentic or true. But if the artist did not know what Jesus looked like, then simply portraying something with ordinary human features would not be an accurate portrayal of Jesus. And accuracy really is important. Jesus' human appearance is divine revelation, and those who teach divine revelation have an obligation to communicate all that God reveals and no more than God reveals. Thus again, if the purpose of pictures of Jesus is pedagogical, then the absence of accuracy is a crucial problem.

In saying that *portraits* of Jesus are not acceptable, but only pictures set in biblical historical contexts, defenders of pictures essentially admit the basic truth of the traditional argument. But what about the latter sort of picture? As defenders of pictures note, artists portray all kinds of historical events involving people whose appearances are unknown and whose portraits they do not claim to produce, and no one dismisses such pictures as false. A person could draw David facing Goliath, reflecting truths about the event that are known from Scripture and avoiding things that are obviously untrue (e.g., portraying David as taller than Goliath or wearing a business suit), and there is no reason to find this objectionable per se. But again, Jesus is not just any historical figure. Unlike everybody else, Jesus himself is supernatural revelation. If the purpose of historical portrayals of Christ is pedagogical, then such portrayals must teach people about Jesus himself. And, as discussed above, whenever we communicate God's special revelation to his people we have the highest obligation to convey nothing more and nothing less than that revelation demands. An artist's imaginative reconstruction of Jesus in an historical event is not the stuff of pedagogical precision.

The fourth point of response concerns the serious

charge that lack of pictures of Jesus communicates an implicit Docetism. In particular, what will our children think about Jesus' supposed manhood if he is always absent in their story-books when many other biblical characters are portrayed? The first response to this is simply to remind readers of what I observed above. Defenders of pictures of Christ offer no concrete evidence for their claim that lack of pictures of Jesus instills Docetic proclivities. I did my own little research and asked my eleven year old son, who has not been trained through pictures of Christ, some basic questions about the theology of the incarnation. I was grateful to find that his answers were perfectly orthodox, and he expressed puzzlement at the suggestion that he might think that Jesus was an ethereal spirit-person because his church and parents never show him pictures of Jesus. How could this possibly be? It appears as though the word of God—preached to him, confirmed to him through the sacraments, and reinforced through private and family Bible-reading and catechetical training—has been sufficient. Amazing in the eyes of the world, perhaps, but should it be surprising to those who profess that the “word of God is living and active” (Hebrews 4:12)? If pedagogy is the driving force behind having pictures of Jesus, as their defenders suggest, then they really need not worry. The word of God, ministered diligently and faithfully, will do its work and keep his people from Docetism.

The final point of response concerns the mental images issue. Is it inevitable that we form mental images of Jesus when we hear stories about him and does this make it acceptable (and is the extremism of WLC 109 thereby exposed)? Whether such mental images are inevitable I really do not know with certainty. Even the defenders of pictures of Jesus, though at times sounding confident about the matter, do not seem to know for sure either, since some claim that all people form mental images naturally and others claim only that most people do so. I noted above that they offer no biblical arguments or psychological studies to establish their varying claims. Speaking personally, I regularly read, teach, and preach about events of Jesus' earthly ministry, and while I cannot say that I never form mental images of these events, I am not particularly conscious of their intrusion into my thoughts. I suppose that I could sit around and contemplate whether I am constitutionally capable of blocking mental images of Jesus when reading the Gospels, but isn't the important question not *whether* I form mental images but *what I do with them* if I form them. If an image of Christ hanging on the cross or sleeping in a manger enters my mind, should I revel in it and cultivate it or should I strive to put it out

of my mind and focus my thoughts elsewhere? It may be similar to ask whether a man whose mind forms an image of a beautiful woman who is not his wife should revel in it and cultivate it or strive to put it out of mind and focus his thoughts elsewhere. Should he cultivate it (and perhaps even draw a picture of it), out of fear that otherwise he will become a Gnostic who denies that God has created beautiful women? Of course the Lord settled that question in the Sermon on the Mount (Matthew 5:28). In regard to a mental image of Christ, we may ask what the purpose of cultivating such an image would be. If we would cultivate it as an aid to worship (perhaps it would help us to keep our concentration during prayer), then the answer seems clear: we should not use created products of our own imagination to mediate our worship of God. If we would cultivate it as something other than an aid to worship—then what would be the point? What sort of relationship with Jesus could be wholesome that did not lead to worship? As the attempt to separate pedagogy about Christ from worship is troublesome, so is any attempt to separate our thoughts about Christ from worship. To think of Christ is to believe and adore. An imaginative mental image of him that intervenes should not be fostered.

CONCLUSION

Confessional Reformed Christianity has traditionally shunned the creation and use of pictures of Jesus, including mental images. The practice of many Reformed Christians in recent years has tolerated and participated in the use of such pictures, however, often without a sense that something might be wrong, and a number of writers and speakers from within the Reformed community have offered a defense of their use, for pedagogical purposes if not for purposes of worship. Having summarized traditional arguments against such pictures and contemporary arguments in support of them, I have concluded that the traditional position is correct and its supporting arguments still essentially sound. The divine revelation of Christ and his gospel is to be received with faith and worship and not added to or subtracted from by our own imagination, and is to be taught to the next generation with fidelity, and with confidence in the means that God has provided for doing so: word and sacrament. Instead of seeking out arguments to defend the easy route of fitting in with mainstream Christian culture, Reformed ministers do much better to buoy their flocks' confidence in the means of grace and to drive them to Christ faithfully week after week through the keys of the kingdom. ■

In Brief: The Intent of Larger Catechism 109 Regarding Pictures of Christ's Humanity

In the preceding article, Professor David VanDrunen notes that Kenneth Gentry contends that Westminster Larger Catechism 109 "technically does not prohibit pictures of Jesus (since such pictures represent only his human nature and do not represent God)..." (p. 220). Gentry's words were "An accurate reading of the Larger Catechism 109 will show I believe that it's technically correct—although it may not have been intended to do this—I believe that it is technically correct and a proper interpretation of it will lead to a different conclusion" [i.e. that Pictures of Christ's body are not proscribed] "than some have held."¹

Dr. Gentry's opinion of what the catechism's words may technically allow cannot withstand the testimony of history; it is very clear what the Westminster Assembly intended. Personal constructions of "an accurate reading" must give way to original intent and the intent of the confessing churches when it comes to interpreting historic doctrinal statements.²

Before adducing some facts, it should be noted that Larger Catechism 109 fits with the doctrine of the Westminster Standards as a whole in proscribing pictures of Christ's humanity. With the incarnation, "two whole, perfect, and distinct natures, the Godhead and the manhood, were inseparably joined together in one person" (Westminster Confession of Faith 8.2), so that one may not depict the human nature exclusive of the divine nature and claim it is a representation of the *person* of Christ; and Westminster LC 40 richly indicates why no work that is proper to Christ's human nature should be viewed in isolation from the whole person. "Q. Why was it requisite that the Mediator should be God and man in one person? A. It was requisite that the Mediator, who was to reconcile God and man, should himself be both God and man, and this in one person, that the proper works of each nature might be accepted of God for us, and relied on by us, as the works of the whole person."³

Facts of the period support this long held and almost unquestioned interpretation of LC 109, that it proscribes representations of Christ in toto. At his 1644 trial, according to Julie Spraggon, the Puritan archenemy William Laud, whose

1. Kenneth L. Gentry, Jr., "Christmas and the Second Commandment," Sermon 1 of *Christmas and Christ*, 34:24–34:43.

2. "The concept of *animus imponentis* finds further significance in that the church is not only the authoritative interpreter of its constitution but that it imposes on its members the oaths and vows that they take to maintain and defend that constitution. *Animus imponentis* means, in this respect, that when an officer in the church subscribes to the constitution of the church, he does so with the explicit understanding that the valid intention as to its meaning is that of the church as a whole and not merely his own private opinion." *Minutes of the Seventy-First General Assembly of the Orthodox Presbyterian Church*, cited in *The Confessional Presbyterian*, 4.208.

3. The author credits Matthew Winzer for noting to the author the internal consistency of the Standards on this subject.