

The Bible on Religious Statues and Images



Do Catholics Worship Statues?
Answer: No!

"Catholics worship statues!" People still make this ridiculous claim. Because Catholics have statues in their churches, goes the accusation, they are violating God's commandment: *"You shall not make for yourself a 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: you shall not bow down to them or serve them"* (Exodus 20:4-5); *"Alas, this people have sinned a great sin; they have made for themselves gods of gold"* (Exodus 32:31).

"God has forbidden the use of images in worship." Yet if people were to "search the scriptures" (John 5:39), they would find the opposite is true. God forbade

the "worship" of statues, but he did not forbid the "religious use" of statues. Instead, he actually commanded their use in religious contexts!

It is right to warn people against the sin of idolatry when they are committing it. But calling Catholics idolaters because they have images of Christ and the saints is based on misunderstanding or ignorance of what the Bible says about the purpose and uses (both good and bad) of statues.

God Said To Make Them?
That's correct!



The Ark of the Covenant

People who oppose religious statuary forget about the many passages where the Lord commands the making of statues.

For example: The Ark of the Covenant

Exodus 25:18-20

"And you shall make two cherubim of gold [i.e., two gold statues of angels]; of hammered work shall you make them, on the two ends of the mercy seat. Make one cherub on the one end, and one cherub on the other end; of one piece of the mercy seat shall you make the cherubim on its two ends. The cherubim shall spread out their wings above, overshadowing the mercy seat with their wings, their faces one to another; toward the mercy seat shall the faces of the cherubim be."

David gave Solomon the plan *"for the altar of incense made of refined gold, and its weight; also his plan for the golden chariot of the cherubim that spread their wings and covered the ark of the covenant of the Lord. All this he made clear by the writing of the hand of the Lord concerning it all, all the work to be done according to the plan"* (1 Chronicles 28:18-19). David's plan for the temple, which the biblical author tells us was *"by the writing of the hand of the Lord concerning it all,"* included statues of angels.

Similarly Ezekiel 41:17-18 describes graven (carved) images in the idealized temple he was shown in a vision, for he writes, *"On the walls round about in the inner room and [on] the nave were carved likenesses of cherubim."*

The Religious Uses of Images



Moses and the fiery serpent

During a plague of serpents sent to punish the Israelites during the exodus, God told Moses to *"make [a statue of] a fiery serpent, and set it on a pole; and every one who is bitten, when he sees it shall live. So Moses made a bronze serpent, and set it on a pole; and if a serpent bit any man, he would look at the bronze serpent and live"* (Numbers 21:8-9).

One had to look at the bronze statue of the serpent to be healed, which shows that statues could be used ritually, not merely as religious decorations.

Catholics use statues, paintings, and other artistic devices to recall the person or thing depicted. Just as it helps to remember one's mother by looking at her photograph, so it helps to recall the example of the saints by looking at pictures of them. Catholics also use statues as teaching tools. In the early Church they were especially useful for the instruction of the illiterate. Many Protestants have pictures of Jesus and other Bible pictures in Sunday school for teaching children. Catholics also use statues to commemorate certain people and events, much as Protestant churches have three-dimensional nativity scenes at Christmas.

If one measured Protestants by the same rule, then by using these "graven" images, they would be practicing the "idolatry" of which they accuse Catholics. But there's no idolatry going on in these situations. God forbids the worship of images as gods, but he doesn't ban the making of images. If he had, religious movies, videos, photographs, paintings, and all similar things would be banned. But, as the case of the bronze serpent shows, God does not even forbid the ritual use of religious images.

It is when people begin to adore a statue as a god that the Lord becomes angry. Thus when people did start to worship the bronze serpent as a snake-god (whom they named "Nehushtan"), the righteous king Hezekiah had it destroyed (2 Kings. 18:4).

What About Bowing?

Sometimes anti-Catholics cite Deuteronomy 5:9, where God said concerning idols, *"You shall not bow down to them."* Since many Catholics sometimes bow or kneel in front of statues of Jesus and the saints, anti-Catholics confuse the legitimate veneration of a sacred image with the sin of idolatry.

Though bowing can be used as a posture in worship, not all bowing is worship. In Japan, people show respect by bowing in greeting (the equivalent of the Western handshake). Similarly, a person can kneel before a king without worshipping him as a god. In the same way, a Catholic who may kneel in front of a statue while praying isn't worshipping the statue or even praying to it, any more than the Protestant who kneels with a Bible in his hands when praying is worshipping the Bible or praying to it.

Hiding the Second Commandment?

And the LORD said to Moses, *"Make a fiery serpent, and set it on a pole; and every one who is bitten, when he sees it, shall live."* So Moses made a bronze serpent... Numbers 21:8-9

Another charge sometimes made by Protestants is that the Catholic Church "hides" the second commandment. This is because in Catholic catechisms, the first commandment is often listed as *"You shall have no other gods before me"* (Exodus 20:3), and the second is listed as *"You shall not take the name of the Lord in vain."* (Exodus 20:7). From this, it is argued that Catholics have deleted the prohibition of idolatry to justify their use of religious statues. But this is false. Catholics simply group the commandments differently from most Protestants.

In Exodus 20:2-17, which gives the Ten Commandments, there are actually fourteen imperative statements. To arrive at Ten Commandments, some statements have to be grouped together, and there is more than one way of doing this. Since, in the ancient world, polytheism and idolatry were always united idolatry being the outward expression of polytheism, the historic Jewish numbering of the Ten Commandments has always grouped together the imperatives *"You shall have no other gods before me"* (Exodus 20:3) and *"You shall not make for yourself a graven image"* (Exodus 20:4). The historic Catholic numbering follows the Jewish numbering on this point, as does the historic Lutheran numbering. Martin Luther recognized that the imperatives against polytheism and idolatry are two parts of a single command.

Jews and Christians abbreviate the commandments so that they can be remembered using a summary, ten-point formula. For example, Jews, Catholics, and Protestants typically summarize the Sabbath commandment as, *"Remember the*

Sabbath to keep it holy," though the commandment's actual text takes four verses (Exodus 20:8-11).

When the prohibition of polytheism/idolatry is summarized, Jews, Catholics, and Lutherans abbreviate it as *"You shall have no other gods before me."* This is no attempt to "hide" the idolatry prohibition (Jews and Lutherans don't even use statues of saints and angels). It is to make learning the Ten Commandments easier. The Catholic Church is not dogmatic about how the Ten Commandments are to be numbered, however.

Now one version of the Ten Commandments can be found in the fifth chapter of the Book of Deuteronomy (also Exodus 20). Comparing Deut. 5:6-21 in a Catholic Bible with that found in a Protestant Bible reveals no essential differences. A few words may differ but that is due to differing translations. The major difference is not content but how Catholics and Protestants traditionally divide up and number these Commandments. Unfortunately the Bible lumps the Ten Commandments all together without division or numbering. (The verse numbers are no help since they were added by Bible scholars many centuries after Christ.)

Traditionally Catholics consider Deut. 5:6-10 as the First Commandment, verse 11 as the Second Commandment, verses 12-15 as the Third Commandment and so on. Verse 21 is split up into the Ninth and Tenth Commandments - distinguishing the desire (lust) to commit adultery from the desire (greed) to steal. This division scheme was advocated by St. Augustine in his writings on Exodus. Traditionally Protestants consider Deut.5:6-7 as the First Commandment, verses 8-10 as the Second Commandment, verse 11 as the Third Commandment and so on. Verse 21 is kept together as the Tenth Commandment.

According to the RSV Bible and Catholic Tradition, the First Commandment is:

(6) I am the LORD your God,...

(7) You shall have no other gods before me.

(8) You shall not make for yourself a 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;

(9) you shall not bow down to them or serve them; for I the Lord your God am a jealous God, visiting the iniquity of the fathers upon the children to the third and fourth generation of those who hate me,

(10) but showing steadfast love to thousands of those who love me and keep my commandments. [Deut. 5:6-10; RSV

Verse 7 forbids the worship of other gods, while verses 8-9 forbid the making of graven (carved) images that would be worshipped as gods, i.e. idols. Now worshipping statues with divine honor is one way of worshipping other gods.

Verse 7 is a general statement of the First Commandment, while verses 8-9 give a specific case of this Commandment. Verses 9-10 present the punishments and rewards that are associated with these Commandments.

By combining together Deut. 5:6-10 into one Commandment, the Catholic Church is accused of altering the Commandments and covering up God's command forbidding graven images. Suspicions are further fueled when Catholic books only present the general form of the Commandment, Deut. 5:7, in order to expedite memorization. Now one must ask the question: "Does God forbid the making of statues, or does He condemn the worship of statues?" If God condemns the divine worship of statues, then the Catholic division scheme is justified since these images would be "other gods before" Him. A separate Commandment based on Deut. 5:8-10 would be redundant.

Now if God simply forbids the making of graven images, then there are problems elsewhere in the Bible. First, in Exodus 25:18-21, God commands Moses to make two statues of angels (cherubim) for the top of the Ark of the Covenant. Later in Numbers 21:8-9, God commands Moses to make a bronze serpent, so that the people who were bitten by snakes could look upon it and be healed. Now it is true that centuries later King Hezekiah destroyed it; however, this action was done because the people worshipped it as a god (2 Kings 18:4). In the Gospel, Jesus compared Himself to the bronze serpent (John 3:14). Continuing in the Old Testament, the inner sanctuary of the Temple contained two large statues of angels according to 1 Kings 6:23-28. In the following verses, Solomon also had the walls of the Temple decorated with carved images of angels, palm trees and flowers (1 Kings 6:29ff). During the Babylonian Captivity, Ezekiel had a vision from God about the design of the new Temple. According to Ezekiel 41:17-25, this new Temple contained graven images of angels and palm trees. These passages in the Bible indicate that God does not forbid the making of statues. If God truly condemned the making of graven images in the "Second Commandment", then He must have changed His mind later in the Old Testament.

The Catholic Church during the Council of Trent (1545-1563) issued a clear statement concerning images and statues.

According to the 25th Session of this General Council:

“The images of Christ and of the Virgin Mother of God, and of the saints are to be had and retained particularly in churches, and due honor and veneration are to be given them; not that any divinity or virtue is believed to be in them on account of which they are to be worshipped, or that anything is to be asked of them, or that trust is to be reposed in images, as was of old by the Gentiles, who placed their hopes in idols; but because the honor which is shown them is referred to the prototypes which these images represent; so that we through the images which we kiss...or bend the knee, adore Christ and venerate the saints, whom they represent.” [The Canons & Decrees of the Council of Trent (TAN Books, 1978) p. 215-6]

The Church does NOT compel her members to kneel or pray before images. No one is allowed by the Church to pray to images since they have no ears to hear or power to help us. The Church allows for the veneration of images as long as the honor is directed towards Christ and His saints.

On a related issue, some Christians may object to the veneration of images of the saints since they believe that honor should be directed towards God alone and not towards Mary or the saints (1 Tim. 1:17). This objection arises from a confusion between divine honor (adoration - supreme honor proper only for God) and respectful honor proper for men. According to the Bible, the people of God bowed down before King David to show him honor (2 Sam. 24:20; 1 Chron. 29:20; 21:21). Obadiah in 1 Kings 18:7 fell prostrate before Elijah showing him reverence for being a prophet of God. In the Ten Commandments, we are told to honor our mother and father (Deut. 5:16). Even Jesus defended and obeyed this Commandment (Mark 7:9-13; Luke 2:51). At least for Mary, our honor to her is in imitation of Jesus, her Son (1 Cor. 11:1). The Church allows for the veneration of the saints and their images as long as it remains honor proper for men. It is good to honor the saints for their love and trust in God (Matt. 22:31-32; Heb. 11:1-12:1).

The Catholic Church has not altered the Ten Commandments of God. The Church has not dropped the "Second Commandment." The Catholic numbering scheme may differ with the Protestant numbering scheme, but this is due to a difference in tradition and not an alteration of God's Commandments. Unfortunately the Bible is not clear on how to divide or number the Ten Commandments. Finally the Church

strictly condemns the adoration (divine worship) of statues, images or even the saints, since this is idolatry and in direct violation of the First Commandment. For Christians a crucifix should not be considered merely as a statue of Jesus hanging on a cross, but as a reminder of the high cost of our salvation as well as His words to us: *"If any man would come after me, let him deny himself and take up his cross and follow me."* [Mark 8:34]

The Form of God?

Some anti-Catholics appeal to Deuteronomy 4:15-18 in their attack on religious statues: *"Since you saw no form on the day that the Lord spoke to you at Horeb out of the midst of the fire, beware lest you act corruptly by making a graven image for yourselves, in the form of any figure, the likeness of male or female, the likeness of any beast that is on the earth, the likeness of any winged bird that flies in the air, the likeness of anything that creeps on the ground, the likeness of any fish that is in the water under the earth."*

We've already shown that God doesn't prohibit the making of statues or images of various creatures for religious purposes (1 Kings. 6:29-32, 8:6-66; 2 Chronicles 3:7-14). But what about statues or images that represent God? Many Protestants would say that's wrong because Deuteronomy 4 says the Israelites did not see God under any form when he made the covenant with them, therefore we should not make symbolic representations of God either. But does Deuteronomy 4 forbid such representations? The Answer Is No

Early in its history, Israel was forbidden to make any depictions of God because he had not revealed himself in a visible form. Given the pagan culture surrounding them, the Israelites might have been tempted to worship God in the form of an animal or some natural object (e.g., a bull or the sun).

But later God did reveal himself under visible forms, such as in Daniel 7:9: *"As I looked, thrones were placed and one that was Ancient of Days took his seat; his raiment was white as snow, and the hair of his head like pure wool; his throne was fiery flames, its wheels were burning fire."*

Protestants make depictions of the Father under this form when they do illustrations of Old Testament prophecies.

The Holy Spirit revealed himself under at least two visible forms that of a dove, at the baptism of Jesus (Matthew 3:16; Mark 1:10; Luke 3:22; John 1:32), and as tongues of fire, on the day of Pentecost (Acts 2:1-4). Protestants use these images when drawing or painting these biblical episodes and when they wear Holy Spirit lapel pins or place dove emblems on their cars.

But, more important, in the Incarnation of Christ his Son, God showed mankind an icon of himself. Paul said, "*He is the image (Greek: ikon) of the invisible God, the firstborn of all creation.*" Christ is the tangible, divine "icon" of the unseen, infinite God.

We read that when the magi were "*going into the house they saw the child with Mary his mother, and they fell down and worshipped him. Then, opening their treasures, they offered him gifts, gold, frankincense, and myrrh*" (Matt. 2:11). Though God did not reveal a form for himself on Mount Horeb, he did reveal one in the house in Bethlehem.

The bottom line is, when God made the New Covenant with us, he did reveal himself under a visible form in Jesus Christ. For that reason, we can make representations of God in Christ. Even Protestants use all sorts of religious images: Pictures of Jesus and other biblical persons appear on a myriad of Bibles, picture books, T-shirts, jewelry, bumper stickers, greeting cards, compact discs, and manger scenes. Christ is even symbolically represented through the Icthus or "fish emblem."

Common sense tells us that, since God has revealed himself in various images, most especially in the incarnate Jesus Christ, it's not wrong for us to use images of these forms to deepen our knowledge and love of God. That's why God revealed himself in these visible forms, and that's why statues and pictures are made of them.

Idolatry Condemned by the Church

Since the days of the apostles, the Catholic Church has consistently condemned the sin of idolatry. The early Church Fathers warn against this sin, and Church councils also dealt with the issue.

The Second Council of Nicaea (787 A.D.), which dealt largely with the question of the religious use of images and icons, said: *"The one who redeemed us from the darkness of idolatrous insanity, Christ our God, when he took for his bride his holy Catholic Church . . . promised he would guard her and assured his holy disciples saying, I am with you every day until the consummation of this age. To this gracious offer some people paid no attention; being hoodwinked by the treacherous foe they abandoned the true line of reasoning . . . and they failed to distinguish the holy from the profane, asserting that the icons of our Lord and of his saints were no different from the wooden images of satanic idols."*

The Catechism of the Council of Trent (1566) taught that idolatry is committed: *"by worshipping idols and images as God, or believing that they possess any divinity or virtue entitling them to our worship, by praying to, or reposing confidence in them"* (374 A.D.).

The Church absolutely recognizes and condemns the sin of idolatry. What anti-Catholics fail to recognize is the distinction between thinking a piece of stone or plaster is a god and desiring to visually remember Christ and the saints in heaven by making statues in their honor. The making and use of religious statues is a thoroughly biblical practice. Anyone who says otherwise doesn't know his Bible.