The Second Commandment: You shall not make any graven image, nor bow down to them or serve them

Q. 107. WHICH IS THE SECOND COMMANDMENT? (WESTMINSTER LARGER CATECHISM)

A. The second commandment is, Thou shalt not make unto thee any graven image, or any likeness of anything that is in heaven above, or that is in the earth beneath, or that is in the water under the earth: Thou shalt not bow down thyself to them, nor serve them: for I the Lord thy God am a jealous God, visiting the iniquity of the fathers upon the children unto the third and fourth generation of them that hate me; and showing mercy unto thousands of them that love me, and keep my commandments.

Q. 108. WHAT ARE THE DUTIES REQUIRED IN THE SECOND COMMANDMENT?

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

Q. 109. WHAT ARE THE SINS FORBIDDEN IN THE SECOND COMMANDMENT?

A. The sins forbidden in the second commandment are, all devising, counseling, commanding, using, and anywise approving, any religious worship not instituted by God himself; tolerating a false religion; the making any representation of God, of all or of any of the three persons, either inwardly in our mind, or outwardly in any kind of image or likeness of any creature: Whatsoever; all worshiping of it, or God in it or by it; the making of any representation of feigned deities, and all worship of them, or service
belonging to them; all superstitious devices, corrupting the worship of God, adding to it, or taking from it, whether invented and taken up of ourselves, or received by tradition from others, though under the title of antiquity, custom, devotion, good intent, or any other pretense: WHATSOEVER; simony; sacrilege; all neglect, contempt, hindering, and opposing the worship and ordinances which God has appointed.

Q. 110. WHAT ARE THE REASONS ANNEXED TO THE SECOND COMMANDMENT, THE MORE TO ENFORCE IT?

A. The reasons annexed to the second commandment, the more to enforce it, contained in these words, For I the Lord thy God am a jealous God, visiting the iniquity of the fathers upon the children unto the third and fourth generation of them that hate me; and showing mercy unto thousands of them that love me, and keep my commandments; are, besides God's sovereignty over us, and propriety in us, his fervent zeal for his own worship, and his revengeful indignation against all false worship, as being a spiritual whoredom; accounting the breakers of this commandment such as hate him, and threatening to punish them unto divers generations; and esteeming the observers of it such as love him and keep his commandments, and promising mercy to them unto many generations.

**General Principles**

**THE UNIQUE PLACE OF THE SECOND COMMANDMENT**

Deut. 4:15-18—

Exodus 32:4—

1 Kings 12:28—

**WHY NO IMAGES? THREE REASONS:**

1. Misunderstanding His freedom

2. Misunderstanding His majesty

3. Misunderstanding His covenant

**THE SPIRITUALITY OF GOD AND THE PROHIBITION OF IMAGES**

Numbers 12:8—
Isaiah 31:3—
John 4:24—

**GOD’S OWN IMAGE**

2 Kings 18:4—
Judges 8:24-27; 17:5-13—
1 Kings 8:27-53—
Ezekiel 1 and 10—

**MAN AS IMAGE OF GOD**

1 Corinthians 3:16; 6:19—
Genesis 9:6 and James 3:9—

*Specific Applications*

**No Cultic Images, but Visual Arts.** Images were not uniformly prohibited; it came down to the purpose behind their use. Samuel erected a monument to the triumph of the Lord (1 Sam.7: 12), Jacob placed a memorial pillar on Rachel’s grave (Gen.35: 20), etc. Even the tabernacle and temple enjoyed the benefits of the visual arts — the candlestick, golden bells and pomegranates, etc. Visual arts are in no way condemned by the second commandment.

**Sanction and Blessing.** To the second commandment are appended a sanction and a blessing. If the head of the family turns away from Yahweh to worship images, his entire family will be swallowed up in his self-willed worship. His sin becomes their stumbling. The opposite is also true. All the way to the most extended generation imaginable, God will show his favor to those who are faithful to Him and keep His commands. David’s house continued for generations, even though they were punished for Solomon’s sins (1 Kings 11:34, 38-39). That this blessing and curse are added to this commandment is significant. Lying and stealing are serious crimes, but turning your back on the Lord to practice self-willed religion is most serious. But these blessings and curses don’t hold true automatically. Pious Jehoshaphat had a godless son Jehoram (1 Kings 22:43; 2 Kings 8:16-18). Three godless sons and a godless grandson (2 Kings 22-23) succeeded God-fearing Josiah.

**Iconoclastic Campaigns. Historical Information**

**Images Today.** Is this prohibition relevant today? Yes, because behind the image lies a perspective. People suppose that by means of an image they can control and manipulate divine power. People imagine they can fashion gods in images in such a way that they automatically enjoy divine favor on
their own plans. So the image gives from to a *mental* image and you cannot eradicate mental images through an iconoclastic campaign of any kind. There is one small step from ancient image worship to modern self-determined worship, in which God is worshipped in a way different from what he has commanded in His word.

What about books for the laity? On many French cathedrals, you will find important stories from the Old and New Testaments carved in stone. The people were illiterate and would receive limited understandings of the Bible from these murals. But the laity in the sense of illiterate people do not exist anymore. We must advance the reading of Scripture. Illustration and image can stimulate that reading, but can never be a substitute for it. What is decisive is that the preaching of the Word and the congregation’s response to that preaching continue to capture the congregation’s attention. Living preaching can be contrasted with fixed images. An image fixates something. A sermon is moving. What a minister says wrongly one Sunday, can be corrected the next. Religious art should develop, but outside the walls of the church. And what may be portrayed is whatever Scripture shows. (What about Jesus in the stable or the apple in Paradise?)

**Rigid Forms.** The image fixates more so than the word that can be corrected. Many things, besides statutes and paintings, in the church can conflict just as much with the second commandment. Take liturgy: KJV only, only Genevan tunes, a particular style of preaching, etc. The decisive element no longer is the living preaching, but the things that make us safe and secure. But then, fixed forms are not wrong, much less fixed formulations. The Apostles Creed has been around for thousands of years, but because it echoes Scripture, it is good. The confessions are iconoclastic — they remove images, not introduce them. At critical points in her history, the church has thrown out images of God by saying to the heretics: God is not as you portray Him, because He has revealed Himself in His Word differently.

**Mental Images.** John Calvin stated that human understanding is a perpetual idol-making factory. The mind and spirit of men begets the idolatrous image — regardless if it subsequently takes the shape of wood or stone (1.11.8). We fashion God according to our own understanding. Psalm 50:21 — “We imagined that God was just like them.” A person leads his own life, imagining that God bestows His approval automatically. Man creates God in His image, ready to serve Him.

Consider Psalm 94 — Yahweh does not see... Then we begin to justify sin - e.g. homosexuality. We imagine God to be a Santa Claus figure, when really it is fearful thing to fall into the hands of the living God. We can also make him into the image of Scrooge — someone who prefers the death of the godless (cf. Rom.4: 5).

As long as human understanding serves as the workshop where images of God are crafted according to our own imaginations, we are summoned by the second commandment to return to God’s Word — the image that continually destroys our images.