

# On the use of images in devotion

by Paul Coulter, March 2008

## Relevant Scriptures

### Old Testament

- *Exodus 20:4-6* – the second commandment forbids the making of an image of any created thing to become an object of worship or to be bowed down to. The central reason given by the Lord is that He is a jealous God. He will not share the devotion of His people with anything or anyone else.
- *Isaiah 40:9f* – the prophet speaks of the absurdity of trying to capture the reality of God's person in an image. He points to creation as evidence of God's greatness and paints a verbal picture of the sovereign God but clearly distinguishes this use of language and of creation from attempting to make an image of God Himself.

Although the Old Testament clearly forbids the creation of images of God or the use of images of created things in worship, it does not discourage other art forms. In fact, the Temple included many images of nature and even the Ark of the Covenant had metal images of cherubim on it.

### New Testament

- *John 1:18* – John tells us that no one has ever seen God, but that Christ has made Him known. This making known, however, is through Christ's character ("full of grace and truth" – v14) rather than His physical appearance.
- *John 20:29* – the normal pattern of post-apostolic New Testament faith is to trust in the Christ whom we have not personally seen. Christ tells Thomas that those who believe although they have not seen Him will be blessed.
- *Acts 17:29* – Paul, speaking in Athens, explains that God's image cannot be captured in gold, silver or stone.
- *Romans 1:18-23* – Paul speaks about the invisible qualities of God that can be known from creation and about the futility of man's thinking that led them to exchange the glory of the immortal God for images of created things.
- *II Corinthians 4:4* – Christ is the image of God, a reference to the fact that in Him God's glory is revealed.
- *Colossians 1:15f* – Paul describes Christ as the image of the invisible God. This refers to His power and authority as creator and sustainer of all things and head of the church.
- *I Timothy 1:17* – God is described as invisible.
- *Hebrews 1:3* – Christ is the exact representation of God's person, but the emphasis here is on His power as sustainer of all things.
- *Hebrews 11* – the nature of faith is certain trust in the things God has promised that we do not yet see and in the God we do not see.
- *I John 3:2* – John speaks about the time when we will see Christ as He is. We will be transformed to be like Him because we see Him as He is. This is
- *I John 4:12* – A second time John tells us that no one has ever seen God, but that He is revealed through people. In this instance it is not through Christ but through us if we love one another as Christ commanded.

The New Testament does not give us any attempt at a physical description of Christ. In fact, the only reference to His appearance is in Isaiah 53:2, where the point is that there was nothing special about how

he looked. Furthermore, the writers of the gospels did not include lengthy descriptions of the physical suffering of Christ. It is only in Revelation 1:12-16 that we read a physical description of Christ, but there the detail is of His glory, not his features.

## **Lessons from Church History**

### **The early Church**

The earliest Christians did not use images of Christ, rather their art focused on symbolic images (e.g. the art of the catacombs in Rome), and the earliest references to images of Christ are of images used by pagans and Gnostic heretics. The church father Irenaeus (d. c.200) spoke critically of such images:

*They also possess images, some of them painted, and others formed from different kinds of material; while they maintain that a likeness of Christ was made by Pilate at that time when Jesus lived among them. They crown these images, and set them up along with the images of the philosophers of the world that is to say, with the images of Pythagoras, and Plato, and Aristotle, and the rest. They have also other modes of honouring these images, after the same manner of the Gentiles [pagans].*

### **Arguments for the use of images (icons)**

Central to the debate about the use of icons is the doctrine of the incarnation and the identification of God with the material world through the body of Christ. John of Damascus (c.676-749), for example, argued that to prohibit the use of icons was tantamount to denying the incarnation, the presence of the Word of God in the material world. For John, and for many within the Orthodox and Roman Catholic churches, icons are a tangible reminder of the physicality of God as revealed in Jesus Christ. The argument, therefore, is that the Old Testament prohibition on images of the divine was superseded by God Himself when He revealed Himself in human form. However, it is my belief that this argument fails because the Scriptures clearly explain that the revelation of God in Christ was through His character, words and actions, rather than through His physical appearance and substance. Although it is important not to become dualistic in our view of Christ or of nature (seeing a false dichotomy between the physical and spiritual), the fact is that we do not have the physical presence of Christ with us now. One day we will, but until then we relate to Him in spiritual terms. The arguments for the use of icons do not find their basis in Scripture but in popular folk religion, where there is a constant desire for something more tangible, more readily defined and more easily controlled. The same arguments that are used for icons (religious images) are also used to justify the Roman Catholic doctrines of transubstantiation and of relics, but we would surely not countenance these ideas. It is true that the incarnate Christ was the true and perfect image of God, but the Scriptures that explain this never make reference to His physical appearance but to His character and power (see above).

### **Reactive iconoclasm**

It appears to be the fact that the use of images in both Eastern and Western churches led inevitably to an unhealthy devotion to the image that distracted from devotion to the living Christ. This led to a reactive iconoclasm in both the Byzantine church (in the 8<sup>th</sup> century) and the Western church (in the 16<sup>th</sup> and 17<sup>th</sup> centuries). Significantly, the same tendency is seen in the history of Israel, where the bronze snake made by Moses under God's orders (Numbers 21) became an object of idolatry later in the history of Israel, so that in the iconoclastic time of Hezekiah it had to be destroyed (II Kings 18:4). We would do well to heed the lessons of history both in the church and Israel and not to somehow think that our generation will avoid this temptation where others did not.

## The Reformers and Puritans

Martin Luther (1483-1546) did not object to the use of images in devotion:

*I am not of the opinion that through the Gospel all the arts should be banished and driven away, as some zealots want to make us believe; but I wish to see them all, especially music, in the service of Him Who gave and created them." Again he says: "I have myself heard those who oppose pictures, read from my German Bible. ... But this contains many pictures of God, of the angels, of men, and of animals, especially in the Revelation of St. John, in the books of Moses, and in the book of Joshua. We therefore kindly beg these fanatics to permit us also to paint these pictures on the wall that they may be remembered and better understood, inasmuch as they can harm as little on the walls as in books. Would to God that I could persuade those who can afford it to paint the whole Bible on their houses, inside and outside, so that all might see; this would indeed be a Christian work. For I am convinced that it is God's will that we should hear and learn what He has done, especially what Christ suffered. But when I hear these things and meditate upon them, I find it impossible not to picture them in my heart. Whether I want to or not, when I hear, of Christ, a human form hanging upon a cross rises up in my heart: just as I see my natural face reflected when I look into water. Now if it is not sinful for me to have Christ's picture in my heart, why should it be sinful to have it before my eyes?*

However, most of the Protestant Reformers, including Calvin and Zwingli, were opposed to the use of images in devotion and their display in church buildings. Although Luther's contribution was helpful in terms of a healthy appreciation of the arts, and other reformers, and particularly the puritans in 17<sup>th</sup> Century England and America, went too far in denying any appropriate use of art in churches, Luther's argument for the use of images in devotion is not convincing. There is a fundamental difference between an image in our hearts, which is fluid and dynamic, and an image before our eyes, which is limited and static.

## Summary

The use of images in devotion clearly led to the problem of idolatry. It appears that images of the saints were used earlier than images of Christ, and this contributed to devotion to the saints in Roman Catholic practice. The Reformers may have swung too far in reaction to this problem by banning any use of the visual arts in churches, but they were undoubtedly correct in identifying that use of images had replaced the living Christ with devotion to a created object. Thus the lesson of Church history (as of the history of Israel, as the bronze snake of Numbers 21 and II Kings 18:4 demonstrates) is that images initially intended for positive purposes subtly become a distraction from the reality they were intended to point to. It would appear to me to be rash and proud to claim that we in our generation can cope with this danger in a way that past generations clearly could not.

## Why use images?

Images of people tend to be used for five purposes:

1. As a keep-sake or reminder of the person in their absence (as in a photo of my wife in my wallet or on my desk)
2. As a record of a special occasion or to include us vicariously in an occasion at which we were not present (as in photos of family Christmases, copies of which may be sent to absent family members to share the memory with them)
3. For educational purposes
4. For advertising or promotional purposes

5. In totalitarian regimes images are used for propaganda means, to remind the people of the constant presence of a "great leader" who may be dead or alive.

Let us consider each of these uses in turn as regards images of Christ:

### **Reminder**

This is not an appropriate use as Christ is NOT absent. He is risen and present with us in the person of the Holy Spirit. This is the classical argument against the use of a crucifix depicting Christ on the cross. He is not on the cross, but risen and glorified, and dwelling in us. The Lord has given us an appropriate "keep-sake" in the bread and cup of the Lord's Supper, which reminds of His death and at the same time anticipates His return.

### **Record**

The simple fact is that we do not have a visual record of the events of Christ's life, and it is through verbal descriptions that God chose to bring us into the events. To attempt to use images to "capture" the events does just that. It captures them and defines them rigidly, inhibiting further learning or shaping. Written records spark the imagination, whereas images tend to stunt it. Think, by way of illustration, of the difference between reading a book (e.g. *The Lion the Witch and the Wardrobe* or *The Lord of the Rings*) and watching the movie adaptation. Although the movie may be good, exhilarating and thought provoking, it does not move the imagination (dare I say it does not move the mind or heart) in the same way that the book does. Furthermore, the knowledge of Christ's living presence is available to all believers individually, not mediated through a priest or artist (this is central to the New Covenant – see Hebrews 8:11). Perhaps there is a danger in this age that artists become the new priesthood, distancing those who do not create art but simply respond to the art of others from their personal experience of God.

### **Education**

This seems to me an appropriate way to use images of events in the life of Christ, where the image or film can give us insights into the historical or cultural context that we may not get so readily through words alone. In these contexts, however, it is possible to critique the image, revealing its limitations as well as discussing its implications.

### **Promotion**

To promote Christianity through images of Christ can be misleading and false. The Scriptures expect that the faith will be "promoted" primarily through the lifestyle of Christians (in particular displayed in their loving community) accompanied by heralding of the good news message. This message centres on the living presence of the risen Christ, not some empty memory. Having said this, the use of films depicting scenes of the life of Christ may be helpful in explaining the good news to people. In such cases it is important that every effort is made to make the dialogue faithful to the Gospels and the depictions of places, people and events historically accurate. Most importantly, the focus should be kept where the Gospels keep it, which is on the person of Jesus and His passion. Even the best productions of the life of Jesus in film will struggle to express the character of Jesus, and especially His demeanour, as the Gospels give relatively little information about this. Where films are used as an evangelistic tool it will often be useful to read and discuss the relevant passage from the Gospels.

### **Propaganda**

This is clearly not an appropriate or helpful way to use an image of Christ. He is Lord of the church and of His followers in a way that no merely human dictator can be, not through fear and conquest but through love and the willing surrender of our lives to Him. His lordship is direct in our lives as the Spirit fills and

leads us, and His authority is expressed in the local church through His under-shepherds – the overseers. One day He, the Chief Shepherd will appear (1 Peter 5:4), and then His presence will be our lamp (Revelation 21:23), but until then it is the written word of God that lights our path as the Spirit illuminates it and empowers it in our lives. To depend on an image of Christ is to neglect the presence of the Spirit who is the Counsellor like Christ. Christ anticipated the time when He would no longer be present in person with His followers, but explained that the Spirit would continue His work and that He would return one day in person (John 14). We must accept that this is God's intended way for us to relate to Him.

## **Conclusions**

Images can have a powerful impact on the viewer. The tendency at times in church history to reject all visual arts does not fit with the Biblical understanding that art is a gift from God and that artistic representations of nature can help to inspire worship as they did in the Jerusalem Temple. No one has ever seen God, but His character has been revealed in the person of Jesus Christ. However, we have no record of the physical appearance of Christ in Scripture, and it is my belief that this "omission" is intentional as we are not supposed to be taken up with the physical. In our current culture there is an increasing appreciation for artistic expression in the form of pictures, video and music. Churches should recognise this and utilise the best of each of these art forms to educate people and to stimulate us to worship the one who created every good thing. We must, however, also recognise the importance of silence and absence of visual stimulation, and, even if our culture does not appreciate such simplicity, we must learn to appreciate it.

As regards the use of images of Christ in worship, it is my belief that this falls under the same censure as images of God the Father. Christ was fully human, and those who knew Him during His time on earth knew what He looked like physically, but the New Testament gives us no warrant for using images of Christ to aid devotion, and in fact He promised that those who believe in Him without seeing Him are blessed. Christ alone could constitute the perfect image of God, but where this idea is mentioned in Scripture the emphasis is always on His character and power, never His physical appearance. We look forward to a day when we will see Christ as He is, but for now we remember Him through taking bread and cup together in the Lord's Supper. To use images of Christ as a devotional aid during communion or at other times is, in my opinion, harmful. No attempt at an image of Christ can possibly be completely accurate. It will either be a photograph of an actor or the product of an artist's imagination. Therefore, it is NOT a picture of Christ. To use it in devotion is, therefore, to substitute the real Christ with a created thing or person. This distracts from the power of what we can know about Christ from Scripture and potentially may lead us into idolatry. The human heart is easily led astray, and we must be careful to avoid anything that may take the place of Christ, even if it is an attempted representation of Him. One day we will see Christ face to face, and until then we should be content to meditate on His words and remember Him in the visual and tactile covenant meal that He instituted.

This does not mean that images and films of Christ can never be used. I believe that they can have a valuable place in education, in illustrating teaching and in evangelism. My concern is with their use in devotion.