Images of Christ and the Vitals of the Reformed System

By Harrison Perkins

The image of Christ's natural body in the fancy darkens the view of Christ, as the image of God, by faith. These two images cannot stand together, no more than Dagon and the ark. Dagon must fall, if the ark comes into the heart.†

Introduction

The Westminster Larger Catechism question number 109 asks, "What are the sins forbidden in the second commandment?" and the answer includes, "the making any representation of God, of all or any of the three persons, either inwardly in our mind, or outwardly in any kind of image or likeness of any creature whatsoever...."[1] In recent times, the catechism's prohibition of making images has proved difficult even for many members of Reformed and Presbyterian churches, much more the prohibition of forming of images in our mind. This dispute, however, even about the use of mental images, is not new.[2] The issue was addressed in the often-cited theological handbook of the Reformed faith, the Leiden *Synopsis Purioris Theologiae*, and the language of the answer to Larger Catechism 109 mirrored the prohibition of mental images from this work.[3] The implications of this debate about mental images were

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†Ralph Erskine, *Faith No Fancy: or, A Treatise of Mental Images* (1745; Philadelphia: William McCulloch, 1805), 65.

1. All citations from the Westminster Standards come from *Westminster Confession of Faith* (1646; Glasgow: Free Presbyterian Publications, 1994, reprinted 2009). Henceforth, Westminster Confession (WCF), Westminster Larger Catechims (WLC), Westminster Shorter Catechism (WSC).

2. Ralph Erskine (1685–1752), a Scottish minister devoted a whole treatise to refuting mental images; Erskine, *Faith No Fancy*. The debate that occasioned this work was apparently Jonathan Edwards's argument about "the psychological neutrality of 'imaginary ideas of Christ.'" John K. La Shell, "Imagination and Idol: A Puritan Tension," *Westminster Theological Journal* 49 (1987): 305.

3. *Synopsis Purioris Theologiae: Synopsis of a Purer Theology: Latin Text and English Translation, Volume 1: Disputations 1–23* (Leiden: Brill, 2014). The Leiden Synopsis "gained great authority within the Reformed academies of the Netherlands and was used for many years as an introduction to theology. Its popularity is further witnessed by the fact it saw five printings between 1625 and 1658. As such, the text of the Synopsis disputations can be used as a good example for defining the orthodox position" (Albert Gootjes, *Claude Pajon (1626–1685) and the Academy of Saumur: The First Controversy over Grace* [Leiden: Brill, 2014], 38). Although not on the subject of WLC 109, Samuel Rutherford (1600–1661) cited the *Synopsis* at the assembly (Chad Van Dixhoorn (ed.), *The Minutes and Papers of the Westminster Assembly 1643–1652*, 5 vols. [Oxford University Press, 2012], 3:505). George Gillespie (1613–1648), another Scottish Commissioner, cited the *Synopsis* regularly (e.g. George Gillespie, *A dispute against the English-popish ceremonies* [Leiden, 1637], 3.2, 3.6, 3.84, 3.162, 3.170; each of the four parts is paginated separately). Edward Reynolds (1599–1676) and Lazarus Seaman (1607–1675), who owned one of the largest personal libraries of the times, both owned a copy, and Sion College, one hub of activity for many Westminster divines that likely functioned as a library away from home during the Assembly for those divines who did not live in London, held this work (*Bibliotheca Hawkinsiana, sive Catalogus variorum Librorum ex Bibliotheca ... Necnon Reverendiss. in Christo Patri Eduardo Reynolde* [1685], 6; *Catalogus Variorum & Insignium Librorum Instructissimæ Bibliothecæ ... Lazari Seaman* [London: Ed Brewster & Guil. Cooper, 1676], 88; and John Spencer, *Catalogus universalis libroum omnium in bibliotheca Collegii Sionii apud Londinenses* [Londini: Ex officina typographica Rob. Leybourni, 1650], 139). The Westminster Abbey Library, which was local and housed many of the works cited by divines who published during their time at the Assembly, was quite cramped. Sion College library was likely much more accessible, as was the large library at the private residence of Seaman. Both libraries were short distances from the rooms of the Scottish Commissioners at Somerset House. The small research library assembled for their use is not known to contain a copy of the *Synopsis*; at least a copy is not in the list of works 'borrowed' from Laud's library. Possibly a copy may have been obtained from elsewhere, but Laud's is the only known list of works in this research library. ("Westminster Abbey Library: And Other Theological Resources of the Assembly of Divines (1643–1652)," in *The Westminster Assembly's Grand Debate* [Naphtali Press, 2014], 379–413).

also not new. Roman Catholic apologists raised objections about the prohibition of images, as did later Protestants in a controversy about images of Christ in the mind that erupted at the time of the Great Awakening.[4] Clearly the view that mental idolatry was prohibited by the second commandment was not new or unique to the Westminster Larger Catechism. The purpose of this essay is to analyze and support the confessional Reformed interpretation of the second commandment, specifically regarding images of the second person of the Trinity, as it relates to the integrity of the entire system. The thesis is that the full system of doctrine expressed in the Westminster Standards excludes the need or possibility of making and using images. Reformed theology necessitates that our doctrines be integrated through the practice of systematic theology, but this should also include a consideration of our ethics.[5] In other words, our ethical positions should also be interrelated throughout our system of doctrine and, conversely, it should be examined how the system of doctrine undergirds a particular ethical position. John Murray argued in this way in support of Sabbatarianism.[6] This article argues that major doctrinal poles require the prohibition of making images of Jesus Christ.

Reformed Protestantism has always been distinct because of its radically Word-centered approach to ministry.[7] In fact, the Puritans rejected images "because they obscure the spirituality, sovereignty, and glory of God. They also minimize the value of his word."[8] Calvin argued, "For our Lord saieth expressly that he shewed not himself to his people any otherwise than by his onely voice, and therefore that it is a corruption to make images."[9] The dominating feature of the later English Reformation was the endeavor to reform and improve Word-centered pulpit ministry.[10] This Reformed emphasis on the Word came with a particular approach to the making and use of images of God generally, but of Christ in particular, and this was one viewpoint that distinguished Reformed from Lutheran Protestantism.[11] Heinrich Bullinger (1504–1570) wrote in the Second Helvetic Confession (1566), "We reject, therefore, not only the idols of Gentiles, but also the images made by Christians. Although indeed Christ assumed a human nature, nevertheless, he did not, therefore, assume it so that he could offer a model for statues and pictures. He denied that he came to abolish the law and the prophets (Matt. 5:17), and the law and the prophets forbid images (Deut. 6:23; Isa. 40:18). He denied that his bodily presence would be beneficial for the church, and promised to be near us perpetually by his Spirit (Jn. 16:7; 2 Cor. 5:5). Who, therefore, would believe that a shadow and likeness of his body would confer any other benefit to the godly?"[12] The Heidelberg Catechism (1563) instructed in questions 96–98,

> 96. What does God require in the second commandment? That we in nowise make any image of God, nor worship him in any other way than he has commanded in his Word.
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> 97. Must we, then, not make any image at all? God may not and can not be imaged in any way; as for creatures,

4. Anthony Burges, *A Treatise of Original Sin* (London, 1658), 355. Samuel Rutherford possibly identified the Catholic apologists to which Burges referred: Rutherford, *The Divine Right of Church-Government and Excommunication* (London: John Field, 1646), 156. Erskine's work, *Faith No Fancy*, reveals the contours of this debate during the Great Awakening.

5. See David VanDrunen, "A *System* of Theology? The Centrality of Covenant for Westminster Systematics," in *The Pattern of Sound Doctrine: Systematics at the Westminster Seminaries: Essays in Honor of Robert B. Strimple*, ed. David VanDrunen (Phillipsburg, NJ: P&R Publishing, 2004), 195–220.

6. John Murray, "Letter to the Editor, from John Murray, Badbea, Scotland," *The Presbyterian Guardian* (June 1969), 85–86. Thanks to Chris Coldwell for this reference. I am grateful to Chris for the many ways he improved this work, and he deserves particular credit for his suggestions of sources and the expansion of the sections about forming mental images.

7. Robert Kolb and Carl R. Trueman, *From Wittenberg to Geneva: Lutheran and Reformed Theology in Conversation* (Grand Rapids, MI: Baker Academic, 2017), 221–234; Carl R. Trueman, "Scripture and Exegesis in Early Modern Reformed Theology," in Ulrich L. Lehner, Richard A. Muller, and A.G. Roeber (eds.), *The Oxford Handbook of Early Modern Theology, 1600–1800* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2016), 179–180; Bryan D. Spinks, "Liturgy and Worship," in Anthony Milton (ed.), *The Oxford History of Anglicanism, Volume 1: Reformation and Identity, c. 1520–1662* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2017), 157–166.

8. La Shell, "Imagination and Idol," 310.

9. John Calvin, *The Sermons of M. Iohn Calvin upon the Fifth Booke of Moses Called Deuteronomie*, trans. by Arthur Golding (London: Henry Middleton for Thomas Woodcocke, 1583), 137.

10. Chad Van Dixhoorn, *God's Ambassadors: The Westminster Assembly and the Reformation of the English Pulpit, 1643–1653* (Grand Rapids, MI: Reformation Heritage Books, 2017).

11. Kolb and Trueman, *From Wittenberg to Geneva*, 207–234.

12. Second Helvetic Confession 4.2 in Phillip Schaff, *The Creeds of Christendom with a History and Critical Notes*, 3 vol. (New York: Harper & Brothers Publishers, 1877), 242 (my translation: 2. *Rejicimus itaque non modo gentium idola, sed et Christianorum simulacra. Tametsi enim Christus humanam assumserit naturam, non ideo tamen assumsit, ut typum praeferret statuariis atque pictoribus. Negavit se venisse ad solvendum legem et prophetas (Matt. v. 17); at lege et prophetis prohibitae sunt imagines (Deut. vi. 23 Isa. xl. 18). Negavit, corporalem suam ecclesiae profuturam praesentiam; Spiritu suo se nobis perpetuo adfuturum promisit (Job. xvi. 7; 2 Cor. v. 5). 3. Quis ergo crederet, umbram vel simulacrum corporis aliquam conferre piis utilitatem?*)

> though they may indeed be imaged, yet God forbids the making or keeping any likeness of them, either to worship them, or by them to serve himself.
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> 98. But may not pictures be tolerated in churches as books for the laity? No; for 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.[13]

Clearly the Heidelberg taught even making any image of God was idolatry that sought to replace the sufficiency of the Word. Even Reformed theologians whom we would anachronistically call Anglicans held this view. James Ussher (1581–1656) wrote in the Irish Articles (1615), "All manner of expressing God the Father, the Sonne, and the holy Ghost, in an outward forme, is utterly unlawfull. As also all other images devised or made by man to the use of religion."[14] This confessional evidence shows the historic Reformed tradition has been explicit in its official rejection of the making and using of images of any person of the Godhead. Reformed Protestants even emphasized the proper ordering of the Ten Commandments to ensure the prohibition of images in the second commandment was clearly and distinctly emphasized over against the Roman Catholic viewpoint.[15]

Some who are part of Presbyterian denominations have recently begun to undermine this confessional view, and debates have even taken place at the General Assembly level.[16] Some, in other words, have adopted a more Lutheran view on the use of images, despite the clear teaching of the standards of Reformed and Presbyterian churches.[17] This is a hard phenomenon to explain, but it likely owes to the impact of accommodating to broader American evangelicalism on the issues of worship; and it indicates that some Presbyterians are taking the confessions less seriously than we have historically as our agreed understanding of what the authoritative Scripture teaches.[18] This drift is unfortunate, because Presbyterians should be deeply attached to our traditional understanding of worship, primarily because Scripture shaped that understanding.[19] *The Directory for The Publick Worship of God* (1645) is evidence that confessionally Reformed thinkers have long given thought to how the Scripture should shape our practices in worship.[20] This consideration does not entail overly strict rigidity in the specifics of what we do in worship, but it does mean Reformed people honor our heritage that is expressed in what we confess together that the Bible teaches about how we should worship God. The trend of increasingly dismissing our confessional theology and practices should be concerning, because it indicates a shift away from our historical identity, and because there are few stopgaps on that trend.

The practice of system subscription in confessional Presbyterian denominations makes systematic theology a necessary lens for approaching the second commandment. Under system subscription, ministerial candidates are permitted to take exceptions to the Westminster Standards as long as those exceptions do not "strike at the vitals" of our religion, although what the vitals are has never been clearly defined. [21] There are an increasing number of candidates taking exception to the traditional view of the second commandment. I argue that the Reformed interpretation of the second commandment, which prohibits images of Christ, should be normative for our lives because the entire force of the Reformed system supports this position. In other

13. Schaff, *Creeds*, 343.

14. *Articles of Religion Agreed upon by the Archbishops and Bishops, and the rest of the Cleargie of Ireland* (Dublin: John Franckton, 1615), sig. C4r (Article 53).

15. Jonathan Willis, *The Reformation of the Decalogue: Religious Identity and the Ten Commandments in England, c. 1485–1625* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2017), 28–56.

16. The 2017 General Assembly of the Presbyterian Church in America, recommendation 52 addressed the issues of materials being distributed in a stated worship service that displayed a representation of Christ. *Minutes of the Forty-Fifth General Assembly of the Presbyterian Church in America* (Lawrenceville, GA: Office of the Stated Clerk of the General Assembly of the Presbyterian Church in America, 2017), 431–438. The recommendation of the minority report against images was adopted by the General Assembly and the Northwest Georgia Presbytery, the presbytery where the service occurred, voted in agreement with the General Assembly that this instance of image use was an exception of substance to the Westminster Standards. See the minutes of the Northwest Georgia Presbytery meeting from September 16, 2017.

17. Kolb and Trueman, *From Wittenberg to Geneva*, 207.

18. R. Scott Clark, *Recovering the Reformed Confession: Our Theology, Piety, and Practice* (Phillipsburg, NJ: P&R Publishing Co., 2008).

19. D.G. Hart and John R. Muether, *With Reverence and Awe: Returning to the Basics of Reformed Worship* (Phillipsburg, NJ: P&R Publishing Company, 2002); D.G. Hart, *Recovering Mother Kirk: The Case for Liturgy in the Reformed Tradition* (Grand Rapids, MI: Baker Academic, 2003).

20. See *The Directory for The Publick Worship of God* in *Westminster Confession of Faith* (1646; Glasgow: Free Presbyterian Publications, 1994, reprinted 2009), 369–394.

21. Charles Hodge, *The Reunion of Old and New-School Presbyterian Churches* (New York: Charles Scribner & Co, 1867), 24–27. Although Hodge did provide a sketch of those things that should be considered vital here, these tenets have never been accepted as such by the official judgment of the Church. It is worth noting that Hodge essentially listed the major subjects of the WCF and that he included points about worship. If the traditional Presbyterian view is that the major points from the standards constitute the "vitals" then it seems contemporary Presbyterians should not draw a smaller circle within the standards of doctrines that are vitals within our confession.

words, I examine whether the second commandment even *could* permit images of Christ, much less should, if one presumes the Reformed system. More specifically, by taking exception to the Westminster Standards on the second commandment, one does strike at the vitals of the system, because this exception has ramifications for many other areas of the system; and to permit images of Christ's humanity is a clear exception to the intent of the Westminster Assembly, as is easily demonstrated from historical sources.[22] Presbyteries, therefore, should not permit this exception. My argument proceeds by situating the implications of making images of Christ in relation to various systematic loci: through covenant and ecclesiology, through theology proper, anthropology, and Christology, and through eschatology. Focusing on the second commandment through the lens of the Reformed system requires that I presume certain positions about the systematic loci used in this study in order to build from those positions toward a view of the second commandment. The positions I presume are those outlined in the Westminster Standards and the already-not yet tension of amillennial eschatology.

Covenant and Community

This section examines the second commandment in light of covenant theology and ecclesiology. Covenant theology gives us a framework to understand the normative value of the second commandment, namely, the abiding nature of the moral law, which has been administered in different capacities through various historical covenants.[23] Covenant theology is the basis of Reformed ecclesiology.[24] The confessional position is that the Decalogue summarizes the moral law, which is normative for all men including those who have received Christ's saving benefits.[25] It is not a covenant of works for believers, as if it presents the conditions for obtaining eternal life, but is the rule to guide the Christian life. Reformed theology as expressed in the covenant theology of the Westminster Standards holds that the moral law, which has been binding since Creation, does require our obedience; and, therefore, we must account for *what* the second commandment requires of us.[26] Although it is highly unlikely that someone entering the ministry in a Reformed denomination would (or could) take exception to the second commandment as such, it should be noted that doing so would be true antinomianism. To take exception to what the commandment requires, however, is no different than taking exception to the commandment itself, and is also antinomianism.[27] When ministerial candidates take exception to Larger Catechism 109, presbyteries need to investigate what they think the second commandment actually does require of us. It is insufficient to know they think the commandment does not forbid images of the incarnate Son because the regulative principle of worship,[28] which says only that which Scripture commands is permitted in worship, governs Reformed practice. Taking exception to the catechism's answer because the second commandment does not forbid making images of the incarnate Christ is contrary to this regulative principle.[29]

Ecclesiology functions in this essay as a subcategory of covenant theology, that is, the church is the covenant community. As such, Scripture, which is also the covenant canon, is its constitution. Michael Horton argued, "Every covenant has a canon (meaning 'rule'), and every community is defined by its constitution. As the word suggests, such a document actually *constitutes* a nation or company."[30] The "light of nature" equipped humanity to understand many things, but more was needed in addition to that knowledge found in creation if we are to know God and His will for us.[31] Additionally, if we are unable to know God fully without special revelation, we also cannot know how to approach Him without it. The Westminster Shorter Catechism answer 2 states, "The Word of God, which is contained in the

22. Chris Coldwell, "*In Brief:* The Intent of Westminster Larger Catechism 109 Regarding Pictures of Christ's Humanity," *The Confessional Presbyterian Journal* 5 (2009) 227–228; 323.

23. WCF 19.1: "*God gave to Adam a law*, as a covenant of works, by which he bound him and all is posterity to personal, entire, exact, and perpetual obedience; promised life upon the fulfilling, and threatened death upon the breach of it: and endued him with power and ability to keep it." WCF 19.2: "*This law, after his fall, continued to be a perfect rule of righteousness, and, as such, was delivered by God upon Mount Sinai*, in ten commandments, and written in two tables: the four first commandments containing our duty towards God; and the other six our duty to man" (emphasis added).

24. Michael S. Horton, *People and Place: A Covenant Ecclesiology* (Louisville, KY: Westminster John Knox Press, 2008).

25. WCF 19.6. For interesting data related to the connection of the moral law as natural law regarding the second commandment, see Anton Houtepen, "The Dialectics if the Icon: A Reference to God," in Willem van Asselt, Paul van Geest, Daniela Müller, Theo Salemink (eds.), *Iconoclasm and Iconoclash: Struggle for Religious Identity* (Leiden: Brill, 2007), 60–61.

26. WCF 19.1, 5

27. WLC 99 (point 6); WCF 1.6, "good and necessary consequence."

28. The Regulative Principle of Worship is often abbreviated RPW.

29. Kolb and Trueman, *From Wittenberg to Geneva*, 229–231.

30. Michael Horton, *The Christian Faith: A Systematic Theology for Pilgrims on the Way* (Grand Rapids, MI: Zondervan, 2011), 151 (Italics original; in all quotations italics are original unless otherwise stated). See also Meredith G. Kline, *The Structure of Biblical Authority, 2nd ed.* (Eugene, OR: Wipf and Stock Publishers, 1997), 21–93.

31. WCF 1.1. See also Horton, *The Christian Faith*, 151.

scriptures of the Old and New Testaments, is the only rule to direct us how we may glorify and enjoy him." The fact that the Scriptures are the *only* rule highlights their necessity and sufficiency in informing worship, that is, how we glorify God.[32] The Scripture, therefore, must guide how we worship because it alone informs us of the proper way to approach God. Thus, the regulative principle of worship is not a doctrine that exists in the abstract as a way to ensure a certain type of worship, but is in fact built upon the Reformed doctrines of Scripture, epistemology, and theology proper. This principle is itself then not additional to the Reformed system but is tied to its fundamental elements.

The church, therefore, is a community normed by the Scripture in its doctrine and practice, which means she must submit to the ways in which God has instructed her to worship. The way that God has instructed the church to worship is by the regular gathering under the means of grace.[33] The means of grace are, especially in this light, the way that God has ordained to bless us with his presence.[34] The means of grace, however, highlight a striking sense of the non-visible nature of God's presence with us in worship. Preaching is an oral-aural event. Although we see the water, bread, and wine, we see those things, and not any person of the Trinity. Yet it is in word, water, bread, and wine that the Spirit or the Son comes to be present among us. The issue in question is not if orthodox Christology allows that Christ *can* be depicted, but whether we even *should* depict Him, even if we can reconcile a depiction with Christology. Although Christological responses are important, this argument from the regulative principle of worship preempts those standard debates.[35]

Practices governed by the regulative principle contrast with the desire to institute images of the Son, whether in worship or outside it. This principle determines how we worship, but the broader principle is that it also informs entirely the way we approach God, whether in formal worship or not. There is in fact no way to approach God other than from a posture of worship. To try and approach God outside worship through means that He did not appoint also violates the regulative principle. We are able to have photographs of family and events to remind us of those memories, but these do not contain any innate reason for us to worship them. Remembering Christ ought to lead us to worship Him because remembering Him includes remembering what He has done for us in salvation as well (1 Cor. 11:25–26). Images of Christ even outside the formal worship setting have, or at least ought to have, an impulse to worship imbedded in the nature of what they call to mind. It is also significant that this regulating principle permits only what Scripture commands in worship and Scripture does not command images of Christ, nor can it be deduced from good and necessary consequence.[36] Because remembering Christ leads us to worship Him, the regulative principle of worship equally applies to images outside of formal worship.[37] Horton wrote, "Today people want to see, touch, and control God.... Not content with hearing God's Word, they want to see God's glory."[38] He argued that to demand a vision of God in the way that we want it now is to fall into the idolatry that so plagued Israel, which is exactly what is at stake in the second commandment.[39] These points come together in our concept of the church as a covenant community governed by Scripture. To make an image of any person of the Trinity, Incarnate or not, is to try to approach God outside of the ways the Scripture commands. Images, therefore, violate the confessional position on the regulative principle, but also the confessional ecclesiology, which holds the church is necessarily governed by this principle of worship because of our doctrine, our Scripture, epistemology, and theology proper. All these doctrines are, therefore, at stake in exceptions to the Standards on the second commandment.

Not every theologian has noticed the interconnected relationship between a covenantal view of Scripture, ecclesiology, and practice. John Frame argued that the second commandment prohibits making images of God only if the purpose is to worship them.[40] Images of God, therefore, may be used for teaching. He affirmed, however, that teaching is a major aspect of worship.[41]

32. Cf. WCF 21.1.

33. WCF 21.5.

34. I am not denying that God's presence is granted through the indwelling Holy Spirit in every believer, but here I am focusing on how God grants his presence to the *community*.

35. See David VanDrunen, "Iconoclasm, Incarnation, and Eschatology: Toward a Catholic Understanding of the Reformed Doctrine of the 'Second' Commandment," *International Journal of Systematic Theology* 6no2 (2004): 136–142.

36. See David VanDrunen, "Pictures of Jesus and the Sovereignty of Divine Revelation: Recent Literature and a Defense of the Confessional Reformed View," *The Confessional Presbyterian* 5 (2009): 218, 223, 225.

37. Francis Turretin, *Institutes of Elenctic Theology,* translated by George Musgrave Giger, edited by James T. Dennison, Jr., 3 volumes (Phillipsburg, NJ: P&R Publishing, 1992–1997), 2.54–57, 62–63.

38. Michael Horton, *A Better Way: Rediscovering the Drama of Christ-Centered Worship* (Grand Rapids, MI: Baker Books, 2002), 36.

39. Horton, *A Better Way,* 37. I return to this theme, more specifically regarding God's presence, below in the section on eschatology.

40. John M. Frame, *The Doctrine of the Christian Life* (Phillipsburg, NJ: P&R Publishing Co., 2008), 453.

41. Frame, *Christian Life,* 482.

It is not clear how this logic maintains that images are forbidden even for the purpose of worship. Additionally, he objected to forbidding images, not necessarily of God, being used in worship by arguing he is not aware of any Bible passage "that restricts teaching in the church to oral and written communication."[42] It is not precisely clear in this statement if "in the church" means the broader life of the church or the worship service proper, but the latter seems more likely because in the same paragraph he contrasted the use of images and drama with preaching. If it is the case that Frame thought anything is permitted in the service that is not explicitly forbidden by a specific passage of Scripture, then he has undermined the regulative principle of worship. He defended the principle earlier in his discussion, but only in a qualified sense.[43] It appeared he actually adopted the normative principle of worship instead, which permits anything that is not explicitly forbidden in Scripture. If Scripture does not command images and drama to be used in worship, then the Reformed regulative principle does not permit them. Frame's exceptions to the Reformed position seem based on inconsistent reasoning. His arguments, however, fall close to the Lutheran position, and should be rejected.[44] Calvin would actually slate Frame's position in with Roman Catholic errors:

> And therefore let us see that wee apply the textes against the Papistes as wee ought to doe, that we may bee armed to prove our case just. But yet must wee bee fully resolved of this, that if any man goe about to expresse Gods Majestie by any shape: he doeth him wrong, and it is high treason to him, because he is uncomprehensible in his glorie.[45]

He concluded that,

> Therefore the setting up of images in Churches is a defiling of them aforehand, and can serve to no purpose but to drawe folke from the pure and true knowledge of GOD. Againe, to what end doe the Papistes set up images in Churches?[46]

Since Calvin preached this long before bulletins and coloring pages were distributed as aids to participation in worship, we can reasonably assume he would apply this same stance on imagery to our paper handouts.[47] With Calvin and in line with the Westminster Standards, we should believe that images, rather than being helpful to proper worship, hinder and distort worship.

Deus, Doulos, And Dominus

The purpose of this section is to examine how making images of the second person of the Trinity intersects with theology proper (Deus), anthropology that regards man as God's servant (doulos), and Christology (Dominus). First, although the focus of this essay is on making images of the second person of the Trinity, looking more broadly at the issue of images of the Godhead in general helps us narrow in on the topic. Making images of the Father is itself an impossible task to attempt. God is infinite and invisible, and it is inherently impossible to depict in a limited space what is infinite and invisible.[48] No one has seen the Father except the Son (Jn. 6:46), which leaves man with no point of reference to depict the Father accurately, if it even were possible to represent Him at all. Any effort to make visible what is invisible is to deny the very nature of the thing. Paul explicitly forbade Christians from trying to construct an image of God: "We are obligated not to think that the divine being is like gold or silver or stone, an image formed by the skill and imagination of man" (Acts 17:29; my translation). The point in the previous section was to show that the regulative principle of worship is part of the Reformed system that excludes the possibility of any legitimate making of images, but this verse is also relevant to show that Paul does outright forbid even *thinking* of God in images that we formulate.[49] This passage obviously undergirds the claim in Larger Catechism 109 that the second commandment prohibits "making any representation of God," even "inwardly in our mind." Making images of God is an offense because it inherently involves speculation on our part and inevitably the maker of the image has to envisage God, as he wants God to be (Rom. 1:21–25).

This argument about depictions of the Father is relevant to the issue of making images of Christ because we also do not have any point of reference to begin accurately depicting the Incarnate Son. We have no representations of the Son from those who saw Him, which

42. Frame, *Christian Life*, 483.
43. Frame, *Christian Life*, 464–470.
44. Harry Boonstra, "Of Images and Image Breakers," *Calvin Theological Journal* 32 (1997): 423.
45. Calvin, *Deuteronomie*, 138.
46. Calvin, *Deuteronomie*, 138.
47. John Calvin, *Institutes of the Christian Religion*, translated by Ford Lewis Battles, edited by John T. McNeil (Louisville, KY: Westminster John Knox Press, 1960), 1.11.5–7.
48. WCF 2.1. See VanDrunen, "Iconoclasm, Incarnation, and Eschatology," 140. Contra Frame, *Christian Life*, 456–460.
49. Calvin, *Institutes*, 1.11.1.

is telling in itself. This lack of a trustworthy prototype means any attempt to make an image of the Son is also speculative and leads to envisioning the Son in a way the artist would have Jesus be rather than how Jesus actually was. The question becomes can we truly and accurately depict Jesus, and if not, why try? Images do not meet any of our needs that are not met in another fashion, and we should not feel they are necessary if God has not commanded them for our good.[50] It actually seems that artists typically think God should look similar to how they look. The classic case is Michelangelo's Sistine Chapel, in which God the Father looks strikingly like an elderly European. The same is generally true with images of the Son, in which He might be seen as blonde and blue-eyed, black, or Hispanic. What is at stake in this is the Creator-creature distinction.[51] When God is made into the image of the artist, he has rendered the Creator in the image of the created (Rom. 1:18–32). The archetypal-ectypal presupposition of Reformed ontology is thus affected by manufacturing images of a Trinitarian person.[52] It is striking that John Calvin's famous quote, "man's nature, so to speak, is a perpetual factory of idols," was written as a refutation of images, wherein he also argued that it is wicked to try and depict God as "he has inwardly conceived."[53] Calvin rightly attributed idolatry to our desire to create an image of the Triune God (Rom. 1:21–25).[54]

Again, not every theologian has grasped the ramifications of God's attributes for second commandment issues. Frame denied that invisibility restricts us from depicting God because God visually reveals Himself in history. His primary example of this visual revelation is the appearance in the Incarnate Son, whose body, although in heaven, would be visible if eyes fell upon it.[55] Although God does visually reveal Himself, it does not register with Frame that these visual revelations of God are at His own prerogative and in forms He chooses. The second commandment still forbids men to construct images. It is one thing for God to decide to reveal Himself in visual form, but it is certainly another for people to try to create a visual representation of God. It is not for us to demand God's revelation, or determine what form it takes. Additionally, the hypothetical possibility of viewing the divine persons is a null point. There is no doubt that we could make an accurate representation of Jesus if we saw Him. The fact is we have not seen Him, and that is because He has chosen to remain bodily in heaven. Even at that, we are still commanded not to make an image of Him. Having the ability to do something does not mean we have the permission. We do not have permission to commit adultery simply because we have the ability to go on a date while our spouse stays at home. We would not say the ability to commit adultery in this situation entails that there is no longer reason not to commit adultery. This reasoning is disastrous when applied to the seventh commandment, and it is disastrous when applied to the second.

The very act of making images of God forms an intersection between theology proper and anthropology. In some sense, it could be considered a noble desire to want to image God in creation by filling it with His image. God Himself, however, has claimed the right to fill creation with His image and has determined to do so in humankind. Meredith Kline argued that creation forms the paradigm for theophany in the creation of humanity in God's image. My point is that man should not attempt to usurp God's right to determine theophanies.[56] God has already determined the way He will fill creation with His image, and man should not think he has right to adjust that method by creating his own images of God. These considerations are relevant to making images of the Son because, in principle, the act of making an image is the same as trying to subvert God's role in filling the earth with His image. God is also at work in His people, conforming them to the image of the Son (Rom. 8:29); and, therefore, God has chosen to fill the world with the image of Christ through the means of sanctification and not by human efforts. Theology, anthropology, and Christology intersect here regarding the second commandment.

Christology has always played a role in the debate about whether we may depict the Son. It is not necessary to rehash standard arguments here, but a summary of their relevance will be helpful. Iconophiles inevitably violate orthodox Christology—although not always in the same ways, as there have been various defenses of their practices.[57] First, to claim that images depict the divine person of the Son by depicting the human Christ is monophysitic, meaning they have undermined traditional Christology by mixing the two natures of

50. Houtepen, "The Dialectics if the Icon," 51.

51. WCF 7.1.

52. Franciscus Junius, *A Treatise on True Theology: With the Life of Franciscus Junius*, translated by David C. Noe (Grand Rapids, MI: Reformation Heritage Books, 2014), 107–120.

53. Calvin, *Institutes*, 1.11.8.

54. Willem J. van Asselt, "The Prohibition of Images and Protestant Identity," in van Asselt, et al (ed.), *Iconoclasm and Iconoclash*, 306–307; VanDrunen, "Pictures of Jesus," 217.

55. Frame, *Christian Life*, 456–460.

56. Meredith G. Kline, *Images of the Spirit* (Grand Rapids, MI: Baker Books, 1980, repr., Eugene, OR: Wipf and Stock Publishers, 1999), 13.

57. VanDrunen, "Iconoclasm, Incarnation, and Eschatology," 137; Milliner, "Iconoclastic Immunity," 508.

Christ.[58] The two natures of Christ have been conceptually blended if an artist claims to display both natures by illustrating Jesus' humanity. Second, to claim that images depict only Jesus' humanity is Nestorian, because they have separated the two natures of Christ by depicting one nature without depicting the two-natured person of Christ.[59] As James Ussher wrote, "An Image can onely represent the man-hood of Christ, and not his God-head, which is the chiefest part in him. Both which Natures being in him unseparable, it were dangerous by painting the one apart from the other, to give occaision of *Arianisme*, *Apollinarisme*, and other Herisies."[60] Milliner has argued that icons present only the flesh and not the divinity of Christ, which is a Nestorian argument.[61] This view also seems to pose the hypothetical anhypostatic flesh, referring to the human nature of Jesus existing separately from the hypostatic union, which has been traditionally rejected.[62] Those who walked on earth with Jesus encountered the full person of the Son in His assumed human nature. The same cannot be said of our gazing at images, because we cannot and should not imagine the divine being (Acts 17:29). It is unhelpful to suggest the hypothetical implications of whether someone could have photographed Jesus, because God did not choose to assume a human nature in a time when He could be photographed; so therefore we should submit to the wisdom of His timing (Rom. 5:6; Gal. 4:4). Ussher actually addressed the issue of a hypothetical situation that would facilitate making of an image:

> That although the painting of Christ were both lawfull to doe, and profitable for remembrance, yet because it hath been so much abused, and no where in Scripture commanded, it is not now to be used: As *Ezechias* worthily brake the Brazen Serpen[t], being abused, although *Moses* had set it up at the Commandement of the Lord, and might have served for a singular Monument of Gods mercies, after the proper use thereof, had not the superstitious opinion thereof been.[63]

Calvin further argued,

> Beholde, they paint and portray Jesus Christ, who (as wee knowe) is not onely man, but also God manifested in the flesh: and what a representation is that? Hee is Gods eternall Sonne, in whom dwelleth the fulnesse of the Godhead, yea even substantially. Seeing it is said, substantially, should wee have portraitures and images whereby the onely flesh may bee represented? Is it not a wyping away of that which is chiefest in our Lorde Jesus Christ, that is to wit, of his divine Majestie? Yes: and therefore whensoever a Crucifix stands mopping & mowing in the Church, it is all one as if the Divell had defaced the Sonne of God.[64]

Any image of the Son therefore, fails to illustrate the fullness of His glorious majesty because it cannot capture His divine nature. It would represent only His humanity and would exclude His divinity, in Nestorian fashion, and should be avoided.

Lastly, to claim images depict the anhypostatic human person of the Son is an adoptionist form of Docetism, which holds that Jesus was a human person who was entered by the divine person of the Son.[65] No one in the Reformed camp has made an argument for depicting a hypothetical human person who had not yet been indwelled by the Christ. The point is important, however, because advocates for images often accuse iconoclasts of another form of Docetism, which teaches that the Son of God merely appears to take on a human nature but that human nature is actually a "heavenly flesh" that is not like ours. David VanDrunen has already offered a sufficient response to the broader

58. For an example of this, see Milliner's description of Theodore of Studios in Milliner, "Iconoclastic Immunity," 513.

59. Calvin, *Institutes*, 1.11.4

60. James Ussher, *A Body of Divinitie, or, the Summe and Substance of Christian Religion, Catechistically propounded, and explained, by way of Question and Answer: Methodically and familiarly handled* (London, 1645), 231. Some have disputed Ussher's authorship of this work, but for a defense that it represents his theology, see Harrison Perkins, "Manuscript and Material Evidence for James Ussher's Authorship of *A Body of Divinitie* (1645)," *Evangelical Quarterly* 89.2 (2018): 133–161.

61. Milliner, "Iconoclastic Immunity," 504.

62. Turretin, *Institutes of Elenctic Theology*, 2.316.

63. Ussher, *Body of Divinitie*, 231–232. Some Reformed Confessions, as well as Calvin and other individual theologians, built a principle from Hezekiah's destruction of the bronze serpent. This demonstrates a broad Reformed appropriation of this exegetical stream of 2 Kings 18:4 in the Reformed tradition, and sets Ussher solidly on the same page with the Reformed on worship despite his support of episcopacy. See the Nassau Confession in *Reformed Confessions of the 16th and 17th Centuries in English Translation,* ed. James T. Dennison, 4 vols. (Reformation Heritage books, 2008–2014), 3.12, 14–15; "*In Translatione:* John Calvin's Letters to the Ministers of Montbéliard (1543–1544): The Genevan Reformer's Advice and Views of the Liturgical Calendar," introduction by Chris Coldwell, translation by David C. Noe, *The Confessional Presbyterian* 13 (2017): 212–213, esp. 212n85. "*In Translatione:* Calvin's Response to a Certain Tricky Middler," trans. R. Victor Bottomly, *The Confessional Presbyterian* 8 (2012): 264; Gillespie, *Ceremonies*, 3.19 (citing Calvin).

64. Calvin, *Deuteronomie*, 138; cf. Calvin, *Institutes*, 1.11.2.

65. Heiko Augustinus Oberman, *The Harvest of Medieval Theology: Gabriel Biel and Late Medieval Nominalism*, 3rd ed. (Grand Rapids, MI: Baker Academic, 1983), 259–261.

accusation of Docetism; but this particular issue of Docetism is worth examining in more depth here, because recent accusations against those who hold the confessional position actually raise the issue of mental images and the implications these have for the Christian life.[66] Frame argued it is Docetic to prohibit mental images of Christ while allowing visualizations of other Gospel narrative events. His argument in favor of mental images apparently assumes that we are allowed to make an illustration of any person who has real flesh.[67] He also claimed it is impossible not to form mental images, but offered no evidence for this.[68] His argument does not take account that not all people in the Gospel narratives are divine persons, nor that there are different rules for how we think about a person of the Triune God than how we think about other human persons. If forced to choose between portraying all aspects of the Gospel narrative including Christ, or no aspects of the Gospel narrative, we should be willing to give up all representations so that we maintain obedience to God. Frame illegitimately assumed the other Gospel depictions are felicitous. Furthermore, just because some people incline towards thinking pictorially as they read narratives does not mean this practice should be indulged when reading stories about the person of Christ. Some people claim they do not think in pictures, and others who find their tendency to think of mental pictures of Christ convicting have taught themselves not to do so. I say this as someone who is inclined to imagine the events pictorially as I read. As an effort at sanctification, I have tried to discipline myself not to envision the person of Christ. Frame's claim, therefore, is not axiomatic and requires at least some attempt at proof.

Mental images were, in fact, a primary target for Westminster divines:

> Fourthly, sacred significant Ceremonies devised by man, are to be reckoned among those Images forbidden in the second commandement. *Polanus* saith, that "every illicit form" is forbidden in the second Commandement. The Professours of *Leyden* call it "Whatever image, whether mentally conceived, or made with hands."[69]

Gillespie made it clear here that images of any kind, including mental images, were forbidden by the explicit demands of the second commandment. Additionally, it was the position of Roman Catholics that mental images of Christ were a necessary aspect of thinking about God, which should give us pause before we accept that view as axiomatic in the way Frame has.[70] VanDrunen underscored what is key in the question: "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?"[71] Indeed we are meant to set aside every other temptation when it enters our minds. Why would it be different with images? This indicates the need to think a little more fully about the implications of mental images for what it means to practice idolatry.

Frame's position is actually not new. Jonathan Edwards (1703–1758) argued that the mind naturally imagines pictures even of God, Christ, and other heavenly things when the person's affections are raised.[72] He taught that mental images are the natural outcome of conceiving of an object.[73] Some did claim to have visions of Christ during the Great Awakening. Frame's argument that it is impossible not to form mental images when we read Gospel narratives is substantially the same as Edwards' claim that heightened affections unavoidably bring about mental images of divine persons. Yet, Ralph Erskine, who admittedly struggled with such images, nevertheless held, "Even if they are unavoidable, imaginary ideas of Christ's human body are sinful and idolatrous."[74] Frame (and Edwards) should heed Puritan warnings against mental imagery that ran on two principles derived from biblical reflection:

66. VanDrunen, "Pictures of Jesus," 226.

67. Frame, *Christian Life*, 459–460.

68. Frame, *Christian Life*, 459–460; see response in VanDrunen, "Pictures of Jesus," 226–227.

69. Gillespie, *Ceremonies*, 3.84 (my translation of the internal quotations: *omnis figura illicita*; *Imaginem quamlibet, sive mente conceptam, sive manu effictam*); cf. *Synopsis Purioris Theologiae*, 455.

70. Rutherford, *Divine Right of Church-Government*, 156.

71. VanDrunen, "Pictures of Jesus," 226.

72. La Shell, "Imagination and Idol," 317. Yet, Edwards should hardly be considered representative of the Reformed mainstream theologically, much less philosophically. Richard A. Muller, "Jonathan Edwards and the Absence of Free Choice: A Parting of Ways in the Reformed Tradition," *Jonathan Edwards Studies* 1no1 (2011): 3–22; Thomas A. Schafer, "Jonathan Edwards and Justification by Faith," *Church History* 20no4 (December 1951): 55–67; George Hunsinger, "Dispositional Soteriology: Jonathan Edwards on Justification by Faith Alone," *Westminster Theological Journal* 66 (2004): 107–120; John W. Cooper, *Panentheism: The Other God of the Philosophers* (Grand Rapids, MI: Baker Academic, 2006), 74–77.

73. La Shell, "Imagination and Idol," 308.

74. John K. La Shell, *Imaginary Ideas of Christ: A Scottish-American Debate* (PhD dissertation, Westminster Theological Seminary Philadelphia, 1986), 108.

> First, the imagination is the root of all idolatry because of its power freely to fashion images which are not in accord with reality. Second, it is generally assumed that the kinds of images which are forbidden to be made by the hands are also prohibited in the mind.[75]

After all, the heart is deceitful above all things, and this undoubtedly affects our imaginations (Jer. 17:9). Paul in fact declared that the foolishness of idolatry results when people "exchanged the glory of the incorruptible God for an image in the form of corruptible man," and that "even though they knew God, they did not honor Him as God or give thanks, but they became futile in their speculations, and their foolish heart was darkened" (Rom. 1:20–23; NASB). The darkened and deceitful heart about which Jeremiah and Paul alert us seems to result from futile speculations that people indulge despite the fact that they knew God and his "*invisible* attributes."

The ramifications of imagining Christ, therefore, are not simply about reading strategies, but actually should lead us to ask if we take the threat of idolatry seriously.[76] To bring the discussion back more precisely to Christology and Docetism, Christ certainly had true human flesh, and it would hypothetically be possible to depict His human nature. That hypothetical ability does not mean we have divine permission to do so, and we should be aware that approaching God in ways He has not authorized constitutes idolatry. This warning holds whether we fashion idols with our hands or with our minds. As Erskine wrote, "to conceive of Christ as man, is carnal worship and idolatry, when this imaginary idea of Him as man is brought in, as helpful and necessary to faith or worship. Which two I mention together, because faith is a special leading part of divine worship."[77] We should realize that we see Christ by faith in the gospel, rather than in a painting, sculpture, drawing, or imaginary image (Gal. 3:1).[78] The traditional Reformed arguments, therefore, stand in response to monophysitism, Nestorianism, and Docetism that ecumenical Christology prohibits depicting Jesus Christ because images of God are forbidden.

Eschatology And Presence

The purpose of this section is to frame the making of images within the context of eschatology. VanDrunen also made an eschatological argument in favor of the Reformed position, in which he focused on the beatific vision.[79] Although there is some overlap between our arguments, I focus on the tension created by eschatology and how our current condition should in fact highlight Christ's noticeable earthly absence within the broader hope of the promise of his presence. I assume amillennial eschatology, but these arguments rest more basically on the already-not yet tension that is, or can be, shared by other eschatologies as well. Willemien Otten argued that the tension between word and image is at the heart of Christianity.[80] Shulamith Laderman used the theophany cloud of Exodus 19 as well as the injunctions to create the tabernacle and Ark of the Covenant (visual pieces) to make basically the same point.[81] Although they were exactly right that there is a tension at work in Christian theology regarding this issue, I believe they have misunderstood what the tension is. Rather than a tension between word and image, I argue that tension is between presence and absence.

Reformed theology holds that when God created Adam, He entered into a covenant of works with Adam, promising life on the condition of perfect obedience.[82] This life entails the full enjoyment of God's presence (Jn. 17:2–3).[83] This offer of life means that the full enjoyment of God's presence is something that belongs to the new creation; it is eschatological. It also means, particularly in light of the Fall, that man cannot enjoy the fullness of God's presence.[84] This obstacle to God's presence is the presence-absence tension that more aptly characterizes Christian theology than a tension between word and image. The presence-absence tension arises from the fact that man was made for the full enjoyment of God's presence, but that this intended reality has been ruptured. Although believers wait for that presence, currently it is God's absence that can be predominantly felt.

This absence, created by ethical alienation, leads some to describe the central issue in "iconoclash" as

75. La Shell, "Imagination and Idol," 315.
76. Burgess, *Treatise of Original Sin*, 348–371.
77. Erskine, *Faith No Fancy*, 65.
78. Erskine, *Faith No Fancy*, 65.
79. VanDrunen, "Iconoclasm, Incarnation, and Eschatology," 142–145.
80. Willemien Otten, "The Tension Between Word and Image in Christianity," in van Asselt, et al (eds.), *Iconoclasm and* Iconoclash, 34.
81. Shulamith Laderman, "Biblical Controversy: A Clash Between Two Divinely Inspired Messages?" in van Asselt, et al (eds.), *Iconoclasm and Iconoclash*, 143–147. This very issue is addressed briefly in Turretin, *Institutes*, 2.65.
82. WCF 7.2. There was some debate in the seventeenth century concerning the exact nature of this life promised to Adam, see Mark A. Herzer, "Adam's Reward: Heaven or Earth," in *Drawn Into Controversie: Reformed Theological Diversity and Debates Within Seventeenth-century British Puritanism*, ed. Michael A.G. Haykin and Mark Jones (Bristol, CT: Vandenhoeck & Ruprecht, 2011), 162–182. I understand this life to be the same life that we will receive in the consummate state because of Christ's obedience. See Herman Witsius, *The Economy of the Covenants Between God and Man* (Grand Rapids, MI: Reformation Heritage Books, 2010), 74.
83. WCF 33.2. See also Witsius, *Economy of the Covenants*, 76–79.
84. WSC 19.

the identification of the "other."[85] This "self-identification" issue described in *Iconoclasm and Iconoclash* might sound like Ludwig Feuerbach's theory that man is looking to project himself as the divine.[86] The real issue that undergirds the discussion, however, is the matter of difficulty in relating to "the other," that is God, in the midst of an overwhelming sense of His absence and the realization that we are unable to overcome that absence. We, therefore, feel much like God is "the other," someone separate from us with whom we need an encounter.

In light of these issues, it seems in some ways reasonable to try and overcome this absence, this alienation, by constructing images that imply the nearness of God by the presence of His "image." Indeed, the visibility of God's form, the beatific vision, is an eschatological concept.[87] We live in an age where eschatological blessings already belong to those in Christ.[88] As we see in the example of Abraham, it is typical for man to wish for some sort of guarantee of things that they have by promise, but not by possession, or better, by faith and not by sight (Gen. 15:8; 2 Cor. 5:7). Although God gave Abraham a covenant rite to assure him he would possess the promise (Gen. 15:7-19), it would have been wrong for Abraham to construct his own method of assuring himself of God's promise. It could be argued that was the exact issue at the root of Abraham's sin in Genesis 16. There is a tension created by the fact we are promised the full presence of God, but that we do not yet possess it (Rev. 21:1–4). This tension, however, does not give us the right to construct our own ways of assuring ourselves of that presence. Some might argue that images of Christ are necessary for the church today because each is a promise of Christ's presence. Although I fully affirm that it is necessary for the church to have a promise of Christ's presence, it is not appropriate for us to create our own means of having that promise in tangible form. Christ has granted to the church promises of His presence that cause disruption in His absence, but the means of communicating those promises to us are not in images we make of Him, nor are we permitted to add additional means of communicating these promises to us, but are restrained to the tangible means commanded in Scripture.

It could be argued that the sense of absence should be something we rejoice in as we await the Second Coming, which will bring the full presence of God and the new creation. Although we should long to be present with Christ, in this life we can receive great comfort by reflecting on the function of Christ's absence from us in the body (Phil. 1:18–26). The crucial point of Christ's absence is that He stands in heaven ever to intercede for us (Rom. 8:34; Heb. 7:25; Acts 7:55–56).[89] As we reflect on Christ's bodily absence from us, it should lead us to contemplate the surety of our eternal state, because in His absence, He stands in our flesh as a pledge to take us there as well (1 John 2:1).[90] His absence, in one sense, therefore, should be something we should treasure.

Framed in this light, it works against the surety of our salvation to try, for the purpose of mediated visibility in images, to pull Christ down from heaven (Rom. 10:6). This point is reinforced by looking at Otten's and Laderman's arguments for a word-image tension in Scripture again. They cited the theophany atop Sinai and the Ark of the Covenant as examples of images crucial to Israel's understanding of God.[91] Although there is certainly a visual component to these examples, the striking thing about both is specifically what is not depicted. In between the wings of the cherubim atop the Ark, where God's presence is said to sit on the mercy seat, is empty space. The crowning point of this visual piece is not a depiction of God, but a reminder of His absence.[92] Similarly, the cloud atop Sinai is not God Himself, but a cloudy seal of God's presence, another reminder God Himself cannot be seen.[93] The cloud is not God. It conceals Him. Even more, Moses' encounter with God atop Sinai in Exodus 33 is the pinnacle of seeing God, and the climactic moment was Moses' being shielded from seeing all but God's back. It is noteworthy that God steered Moses away from the visual and led him to worship in light of the *proclamation* of His name and attributes (Ex. 33:19; 34:6-7). These instances are all reminders that the word-image tension is better expressed in terms of presence-absence, and many of the visual features Laderman and Otten cited are actually reminders emphasizing God's relative absence compared to the full presence for which we hope (Rev. 21:1–4). It was Christ Himself who said that it would be better for His people on earth if He ascended into heaven than if He remained with us bodily (Jn. 16:7). Peter Martyr Vermigli (1499–1562) commented on this verse,

85. Van Asselt et al (ed.), *Iconoclasm and Iconoclash*, 8–10.

86. John E. Wilson, *Introduction to Modern Theology: Trajectories in the German Tradition* (Louisville, KY: Westminster John Knox Press, 2007), 74–75.

87. Carl R. Trueman, *Grace Alone: Salvation as a Gift of God* (Grand Rapids, MI: Zondervan, 2017), 96–102.

88. WLC 83.

89. WCF 8.4, 8; 17.2; WLC 44, 54–55, 79.

90. Heidelberg Catechism 49.

91. Otten, "The Tension Between Word and Image in Christianity," 34; Laderman, "Biblical Controversy: A Clash Between Two Divinely Inspired Messages?" 143–147.

92. Van Asselt et al, *Iconoclasm and Iconoclash*, 18.

93. Calvin, *Institutes*, 1.11.3.

> Christ comforted the Apostles when he was on earth, because it was the time that he needed to depart, saying that unless he departed, the Spirit, who is the Comforter, would not be sent to them (John 16:7). This means the bodily presence of Christ obstructed them so that they were not suitable to receive the Spirit. But if this is truly said concerning the actual bodily presence of the Lord, how much more must it be affirmed that images and statues of him are obstructions?[94]

Vermigli noted that the bodily presence of Christ prevented the coming of the Spirit. Clearly, it is better to have Christ indwell all believers by the Spirit than for Him to be in one place on earth bodily. Yet, as Vermigli indicated, the depiction of His human nature is an attempt to tear Christ from heaven and replace the Spirit in our hearts with a painting on our walls.

The biblical material that causes us to reflect upon, and grapple with, the implications of Christ's absence has not been received by all to mean we should take his absence itself as a promise of our future delivery. Daniel A. Siedell, having stated that he writes from a basically Reformed perspective, has made the argument that we should use "icons not merely as aesthetic teaching tools, but as dogmatic markers of Christology and witnesses to the kingdom to come."[95] He continued this argument: "The icon (*eikon*, 'image'), then, is a material means of grace, a pointer through which devotion, contemplation, and communion with God are enacted. It is the sacramental presence of a transcendent world."[96] He appears to think that iconoclasm was an oddity in the Christian tradition that needed to be squeezed out because it had "roots in Neoplatonic thought, particularly as it is manifest in Origen."[97] He based this historical assessment on the fact that the second Council of Nicaea ruled against the iconoclast movement in 787, and ancient theologians like John of Damascus promoted the use of images.[98] He argued that the denial of images rejects the goodness of the material creation, and explained that

> [a] key aspect of the theory and practice of icon veneration is that the material world is not, as Greek philosophy assumed, a burden that must be abandoned or transcended in order to achieve communion with God or participate in his divine nature (2 Pet. 1:4). The material means by which divine transcendence is or can be experienced.[99]

It seems that the only way Siedell can conceive of affirming the goodness of God by means of the material world is by creating images. This restricted viewpoint is why he believed that "Nicene Christianity does not merely tolerate images in the church. It *requires* them."[100] He further argued that manmade images are actually the way that the people of God can interact with God through material means: "The economy of the icon operates in a worldview that is profoundly sacramental, in which the transcendent is mediated through the immanent and is recognized, experienced, and contemplated through material means."[101] Siedell, in other words, has located the Christian relationship to their Creator in a piece of art.[102]

There are three major problems with Siedell's argument, however, and the first is historical. There was not a unified acceptance of images in the early church. Some fourth century theologians "denied the possibility of artistically delineating Christ's image."[103] He also missed that the so-called seventh ecumenical council in Nicaea was not as forthright and undisputed as the previous councils. There was an earlier council in Hieria, convened by Constantine V in 754, that was then considered ecumenical, and it condemned the use of images.[104] The iconoclast cause had even begun years before under Emperor Leo III. The reason for the dispute about images actually concerned Christology.[105] This council concluded that making images of Christ results in Christological heresy, and argued along the same lines I did above.[106] The iconophile success was apparently a brief lacuna in the early church under the Empress Irene, as the iconoclast position was reaffirmed

94. Peter Martyr Vermigli, *Loci Communes* (London: Thomas Vautrollerius, 1583), 220 (my translation: *Christus cum esset in terris, quod iam abiturus esset, consolabatur Apostolos, quod nisi discederet, Spiritus paracletus non esset illis mittendus: quod ad carnem illos impediret, ne idonei essent ad spiritum accipiendum. Quod si vere dicitur de carne Domini, quanto magis de imaginibus & statuis eius affirmandum erit?*).

95. Daniel A. Siedell, *God in the Gallery: A Christian Embrace of Modern Art* (Grand Rapids, MI: Baker Academic, 2008), 17.

96. Siedell, *God in the Gallery*, 30.

97. Siedell, *God in the Gallery*, 31.

98. Siedell, *God in the Gallery*, 30–31.

99. Siedell, *God in the Gallery*, 32.

100. Siedell, *God in the Gallery*, 31 (italics original).

101. Siedell, *God in the Gallery*, 34.

102. Siedell, *God in the Gallery*, 32–34.

103. "Iconoclasm," in Alexander P. Kazhdan (ed.), *The Oxford Dictionary of Byzantium* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1991), 975.

104. John Meyendorf, *Byzantine Theology: Historical Trends and Doctrinal Themes* (New York: Fordham University Press, 1979), 44; Jamal J. Elias, *Aisha's Cushion: Religious Art, Perception, and Practice in Islam* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard Univerisity Press, 2012), 59–60.

105. Elias, *Aisha's Cushion*, 60; "Iconoclasm," *Oxford Dictionary of Byzantium*, 975.

106. "Hieria, Local Council of," in *Oxford Dictionary of Byzantium*, 929; Meyendorf, *Byzantine Theology*, 44.

at the ascension of Emperor Leo V in 814.[107] Iconoclasts were successful until the death of Emperor Theophilus in 842. Only in 843 did the inconophile position take firm hold with the decision of Theophilus' widow.[108] Additionally, the iconoclast impulse was not Neoplatonic, as Siedell claimed, but had its heritage of the Christian faith, and religions with Abrahamic roots in general.[109] Jamal Elias described the traditional roots of the iconoclast movement:

> Despite the attention given to the period from 724 to 843 as a phase of Christian history, in fact, Byzantine iconoclasm was grounded in antecedents not only in pre-Christian religious understandings but in Christianity itself, a historical observation that situates Christianity more solidly in an attitude toward religious images that is shared across faith communities, including Islam. The period of Christian history prior to the eighth century was characterized more by a widespread distrust of images than by any systematic veneration of them; at the very least, many early Christians displayed an indifference to religious images.[110]

Even given this point, the development of the religious use of images, and particularly the cross, was connected to the link between those images and imperial rule rather than to any sacramental promises as Siedell argued.[111] The definition from the Council of Hieria went so far as to say,

> After we had carefully examined their decrees ["principally those of the six holy Ecumenical Synods"] under the guidance of the Holy Spirit, we found that the unlawful art of painting living creatures blasphemed the fundamental doctrine of our salvation—namely, the Incarnation of Christ, and contradicted the six holy synods. These condemned Nestorius because he divided the one Son and Word of God into two sons, and on the other side, Arius, Dioscorus, Eutyches, and Severus, because they maintained a mingling of the two natures of the one Christ.[112]

This evidence demonstrates that iconoclasm was focused on the theological issues of Christology and salvation, and was not a brief movement.[113] Rather, it had ecumenical, conciliar support that a later council tried to overturn.[114] Yet, the nature of an ecumenical council is that it is the settled agreement of the entire church. The Christian tradition, therefore, was certainly not as settled about the use of images as Siedell imagined, and there was much opposition to their use, especially along Christological lines.

The second major problem with Siedell's argument is that it conflicts with the theology of the Reformed tradition. In contrast to Siedell, who thought that the Incarnation and ascension necessitate images, the Reformed argued that it utterly does away with them. Jerome Zanchi (1516-1590) wrote,

> But with the advent of Christ, as the Fathers wrote, there was the ejection of the devil out of the doors, and even the idols have fallen. How then were images again introduced into the Church of Christ? Whoever would see those images, establishes extraordinary lies.[115]

Zanchi clearly thought the incarnation did away with the notion of images, and that using them is an act of lying to the Church of Christ. Whereas Siedell thinks a manmade image is a promise from God, Zanchi recognized that they were in fact lies substituted for the ways God instituted to receive his promises. Ussher took Zanchi's view even further, "God by such Images is, as it were, mocked, *Rom. 1.23.*"[116] Siedell, depending mostly on Roman Catholic and Eastern Orthodox theologians, thought images were necessary to the Christian faith, and that they are the sacramental encounter between God and the believer.[117] Ussher on the other hand argued from Scripture, "That we must not give the least token of Reverence; either in Body, or in Soule, unto any religious Images, *Psal. 97.7. Hab. 2.18. Isa. 44.15. Exod.*

107. Elias, *Aisha's Cushion*, 61; "Iconoclasm," in *Oxford Dictionary of Byzantium*, 976.

108. "Iconoclast Controversy," in *Encyclopaedia Britannica* (accessed on March 3, 2018 at https://www.britannica.com/event/Iconoclastic-Controversy).

109. "Iconoclasm," in *Oxford Dictionary of Byzantium*, 976.

110. Elias, *Aisha's Cushion*, 62; "Iconoclasm," in *Oxford Dictionary of Byzantium*, 976.

111. Elias, *Aisha's Cushion*, 62–63; "Iconoclasm," in *Oxford Dictionary of Byzantium*, 976–977.

112. "Epitome of the Definition of the Iconoclastic Conciliabulum, Held in Constantinople, A.D. 754 Iconoclastic" in Paul Halsall (ed.), *Internet Medieval Sourcebook*, produced by Fordham University Center for Medieval Studies (accessed March 3, 2018 at https://sourcebooks.fordham.edu/halsall/source/icono-cncl754.asp).

113. "Iconoclasm," in *Oxford Dictionary of Byzantium*, 976.

114. Contra Siedell, *God in the Gallery*, 31.

115. Hieron Zanchii, *Tractationum Theologicarum Volumen De Statu Peccati et Legali* (Neustadt: Wilhelm Harnisch, 1603), 495 (my translation: *Sed cùm ad Christi adventum, ut scribant Patres, ejectio foras Diabolo, corruerint etiam idola: quomodo denuò introductae imagines fuerunt in Ecclesium Christi? Qui illas tuentur, mira figunt mendacia.*)

116. Ussher, *Body of Divinitie*, 231.

117. Siedell, *God in the Gallery*, 32–34.

32.4."[118] When Siedell promoted genuine use of images *in worship* because "[t]he key principle of icon veneration is that the honor shown to the image is transferred to the prototype, and whoever honors an image honors the person represented by it," he should have remembered Calvin's reflection on Judges 8: "Moreover, God vehemently detests that which mortals contrive from themselves for his worship."[119] Even though Siedell purported to argue from a Reformed position, the Reformed tradition with its express dependence on actual biblical texts obviously does not square with his arguments, which have a striking lack of appeal to Scripture.

The last and most significant problem with Siedell's position is that it conflicts with the biblical data. His argument that "[t]he icon (*eikon*, "image"), then, is a material means of grace" and a "sacramental presence of a transcendent world" outright contradicts the claims of the Apostle Paul, who taught that "Jesus Christ was publicly portrayed as crucified before your eyes" (Gal. 3:1; my translation). Interestingly, this did not mean that the Galatians had seen a painting of the crucified Christ, but that the preaching of the gospel had sufficiently displayed the crucifixion for them.[120] Preaching is sufficient for our needs and no literal visualization is required to experience the gospel. In other words, Christ comes to His people in the preaching of the Word. Paul made this point clear when he said that Christ came and preached to the Ephesians, despite the fact that there is no record that Christ ever went to Ephesus (Eph. 2:17). Clearly, Christ came and preached through those ordained servants of the church who proclaimed the gospel in their presence. Clearly, the preaching of the Word of Christ is the primary means by which God delivers His promises to His people. Tellingly, Siedell's argument that our attempt to instantiate the presence of God through art corresponds with Abraham's attempt to realize the promise of God by having a child with Hagar instead of Sarah (Gen. 16). Abraham's self-appointed means to achieve the promises of God ended in disaster, and we should take that as a warning (Gal. 4:21–31).

Perhaps not surprisingly, I argue that the Lord's Supper is precisely the material reminder of the presence-absence tension fit for the church. The Supper is not only a promise of Christ's eschatological presence, it is also fully consistent with the regulative principle of worship and actually has the promises of Christ to support it (Matt. 26; Mk. 14; Lk. 22; 1 Cor. 11:17-34).[121] It is the God-ordained means of visibly setting forth the benefits of Christ.[122] The very reason for the Supper is understood in light of Christ not being bodily present with us (1 Cor. 11:25–26; Mk. 14:25; Lk. 22:19). Although the Supper is thus a reminder of Christ's absence, it is also a way to bridge the gap created by the ascension, because in the Supper Christ makes Himself present with us again in the elements (1 Cor. 10:16–17).[123] Although a prominent feature of the Lord's Supper as a fulfillment of the Passover meal is the striking absence of a lamb, we know that absence means that our Lamb stands once-and-for-all in heaven to save us. The sacrament that Christ ordained is the means by which He has promised to make Himself present with us in accommodation until He comes to be present with us in fullness at His Second Coming. The iconoclastic Council of Hieria actually decided that "the only true image of Christ, representing him in his totality, was the Eucharist."[124] Calvin further argued,

> And by the waye let us marke, that the true meane to seeke God after such sorte as he uttereth himselfe, is, that after we once knowe him, wee doe also consider that hee stoopeth to our rudenes, and yet cease not to seeke him by mounting up higher, and by conceiving the thinges spiritually which the Sacramentes doe shewe us. It is true that by them God commeth downe to us.[125]

118. Ussher, *Body of Divinitie*, 232.

119. Siedell, *God in the Gallery*, 30; Ioannis Calvini, *Institutio Christianae Relionis*, 4.10.25 in *Corpus Reformatorum 30: Ioannus Calvini Opera Quae Supersunt Omnia*, vol. 2, ed. Guilielmus Baum, Eduardus Cunitz, and Eduardus Reuss (Braunschweig: C.A. Schwetschke and Sons, 1864), col. 886 (my translation: *Quantopere autem abominetur Deus, quae mortales ex se ipsis excogitant ad eum colendum, alter non inferior Menoha Gedeon insigni document est, cuius ephod non modo ei et familiae, sed toti populo cessit in ruinam (Iud. 8,27). Denique adventitia quaelibet inventio, qua Deum homines colere appetunt, nihil aliud est quam verae sanctimoniae pollutio.*)

120. Ernest de Witt Burton, *A Critical and Exegetical Commentary on Galatians*, International Critical Commentary (Edinburgh: T&T Clark, 1921), 143–147; Herman Ridderbos, *The Epistle of Paul to the Churches of Galatia*, New International Commentary on the New Testament (Grand Rapids, MI: William B. Eerdmans Publishing Co., 1953), 111–112; F.F. Bruce, *Galatians*, New International Commentary on the Greek New Testament (Grand Rapids, MI: William B. Eerdmans Publishing Co., 1982), 148; Thomas Schreiner, *Galatians*, Zondervan Exegetical Commentary on the New Testament (Grand Rapids, MI: Zondervan, 2010), 181–182; Douglas J. Moo, *Galatians*, Baker Exegetical Commentary on the New Testament (Grand Rapids, MI: Baker Academic, 2013), 181–182.

121. WCF 29.1; WLC 168–169.

122. WCF 29.7

123. WCF 29.7; WLC 170

124. "Iconoclasm," in *Oxford Dictionary of Byzantium*, 975; "Hieria, Local Council of," in *Oxford Dictionary of Byzantium*, 929. ("Eucharist" was written in all capital letters in the original to indicate there was an entry for this topic within the work cited. I have written it with lower case letters to avoid confusion about emphasis.)

125. Calvin, *Deuteronomie*, 138.

Reformed Churches confess this position, as is clear in the Belgic Confession (1561), article 35:

> Therefore, Christ always resides at the right hand of his Father in heaven, but that does not prevent him from communicating himself to us through faith. Again, this meal is a spiritual table, in which Christ offers to us participation with himself and with all his benefits.[126]

The Westminster Confession of Faith furthered this view in §7 of chapter 29,

> Worthy receivers outwardly partaking of the visible elements in this sacrament, do then also, inwardly by faith, really and indeed, yet not carnally and corporally, but spiritually, receive and feed upon Christ crucified, and all benefits of His death: the body and blood of Christ being then, not corporally or carnally, in, with, or under the bread and wine; yet, as really, but spiritually, present to the faith of believers in that ordinance, as the elements themselves are to their outward senses.

It is clear in the Reformed view that Christ makes promises about His presence with us through the sacrament that He instituted. When He promised "Behold, I am with you always, to the end of the age," it was in the context of making disciples by baptizing (sacraments) and teaching (preaching), not in the context of creating images of Him (Matt. 28:19–20). No image of Christ is a promise of His presence, because those images do not come from God. They are manmade fabrications that have no support from the Word of God. If we construct our own so-called means of grace, those means are not guaranteed to be effectual for the elect.[127] We, therefore, should not substitute human attempts to assure ourselves of Christ's presence, such as images, for the means Christ has promised to use to make Himself present with us.

Conclusion

Much more could be said to draw connections between each of the doctrinal loci and how they relate to the second commandment. The arguments here have not even scratched the surface of exegetical and theological material that could supplement what has been presented. The highly significant historical argument that the iconophile position was not the outright position of the early church can actually be further documented, and the implications explored.[128] Additionally, I have not used any arguments that "start from scratch" to argue against images of the Son, nor have I tried to respond directly to the criticisms that are raised against the traditional Reformed position on the second commandment. This essay has also not addressed the use of general images in worship, that is, images not of a person of the Godhead.[129] The purpose of this essay, rather, has been to establish that there are connections between the Reformed position on the second commandment and other essential doctrines of the Reformed system. It should be clear that the making of images of Christ has no room in the Reformed system, or in the practice of Reformed churches. The rejection of images is something that has always marked Reformed churches, and it should remain so. Those who desire to make and use images of Christ for any purpose, assuming they maintain other Protestant convictions, take a Lutheran view and share the Lutheran position on worship and piety.[130] Perhaps for those who affirm the use of images, the Lutheran communion would be a more suitable fit. As I have argued in this thesis, the Reformed interpretation of the second commandment, which prohibits images of Christ, should be normative for our lives because the entire force of the Reformed system supports this position. The immediate import of this thesis is that exceptions to the confessional position do strike at the vitals of our faith and should not be permitted by presbyteries.▪

126. Festus Hommius (ed.), *Specimen controversiarum Belgicarum. Seu Confessio ecclesiarum reformatarum in Belgio* (Leiden: ex officina Elzeviriana, 1618), 131 (my translation: *Christus itaque semper ad dextram Patris in coelis residet, nec ideo minus se nobis per fidem communicat. Porro haec Coena mensa est spiritualis, in qua Christus seipsum nobis cum omnibus bonis suis participandum offert, efficitque ut nos in illa, tam illo ipso, quam merito passionis mortisque ipsius fruamur.*). Although the Belgic Confession was originally composed in French, the Synod of Dort adopted the Latin text in 1619.

127. WLC 161.

128. See Leo Donald Davis, SJ, *The First Seven Ecumenical Councils (325–787): Their History and Theology* (Wilmington, DE: Michael Glazier, 1983), 290–322, especially 302–304. Paul J. Alexander, "Church Councils and Patristic Authority: The Iconoclastic Councils of Hiereia (754) and St. Sophia (815)," *Harvard Studies in Classical Philology* 63 (1958): 493–505, contra Frame, *Doctrine of the Christian Life*, 482. The historical issues involved are certainly more complicated than Frame suggested. Documentation is in Daniel J. Sahas, *Icons and Logos: Sources in Eighth-Century Iconoclasm: An Annotated Translation of the Sixth Session of the Seventh Ecumenical Council of Constantinople (Nicaea, 787)* (Toronto: University of Toronto Press, 1986).

129. This issue is raised by Frame, *Doctrine of the Christian Life*, 451–454, 481–484.

130. Kolb and Trueman, *From Wittenberg to Geneva*, 211–217, 229–231.

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