

No. 33: The Second Word I: Seeing & Hearing

Posted By [James B. Jordan](#) On June 1, 1994 @ 12:00 am In [Rite Reasons Newsletter](#) | [Comments Disabled](#)

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While this newsletter is dated June, this essay is actually being finalized and prepared for shipment in November. What this reflects more than anything else is my personal reluctance to take up this topic. The reason is that a number of friends and acquaintances have over the years, some rather recently, abandoned authentic Christianity for the heresy of idolatry, moving into one of the three branches of the Church that are infested with idolatry: Eastern Orthodoxy, Roman Catholicism, and Anglo-Catholicism. All of us have a natural reluctance to draw the line when it comes to our friends, but on a subject this important, which God says is extremely important, our friends sometimes leave us no choice.

I have stood forthrightly and clearly against the violation of the Second Word for as many years as I have been a teacher. Thus, when my friends decide to ignore God's command, they can hardly be surprised that I must join Him in condemning them. For me to do any less would be unfaithfulness to the Lord who bought me. I have dealt with this topic in *The Liturgy Trap*, but as part of our studies in civilization, I must now take it up in more detail.

Part of the fundamental meaning of the Second Word is the opposition of the ear and the eye as means of interacting with God. The reason that the eye cannot be used as a way of interacting with God is that God is invisible. Visibility is not an attribute of God. God makes Himself visible, but in Himself He is invisible.

On the other hand, God is Pure Language. Language or Wordness is an attribute of God; indeed, so much so that the Second Person of the Godhead is the Word of God. As I have noted before, the first three commandments have a trinitarian focus, and it is precisely the Second Word (notice that they are all called "Words" not "pictures") that relates to the issue of the visual in worship.

Not only does God reveal Himself in His Word and not in pictures, but even the nature of language itself and of the alphabet is brought into God's nature. He is "Alpha and Omega," and several passages of the Bible actually use the Hebrew alphabet (from aleph to tav) to lay out the truth of God. At this point, let me quote from my commentary on the book of Revelation, a work in progress, on Revelation 1:8.

Alpha and Omega

Jesus is the Word of God. In Hebrew, He is also the Alphabet of God. Those who want to take *logos* in John 1:1 as "logic" or "reason" are sorely mistaken. The Biblical concept of God as Word is much fuller than mere mental logic. It is that God is Pure Language. That is, language or wordness is an attribute of God. This is why the revelation and worship of God is verbal, not visual, and why adoring things made by human hands is forbidden in the Second Word or Commandment. It is also why the false worship in Revelation is image worship (Revelation 13:14). If we were to study the nature of human language, we would see that language itself reveals the nature and character of God. Up to this point, however, linguistics has been done without this theological reference point, though some Christian linguists are beginning to understand the matter better today, notably Eugen Rosenstock-Huessy.

Thus, by taking the name "Alpha and Omega," God says that He is the Fountain of all language. Apart from God, men grow silent and language declines. In hell no one speaks. Christian cultures are literary. Literacy spreads to all. Books are written and published. Language increases in expressiveness. People learn other tongues as part of their basic education.

There are a number of passages in the Scriptures that are arranged alphabetically. Most of us are familiar with Psalm 119, which is arranged in 22 sections according to the Hebrew alphabet. Each section has eight verses, all beginning with the same letter, and proceeding from aleph to tav (the last letter of the Hebrew alphabet). But several other psalms are also alphabetical, either completely or partially: Psalm 9-10 (which is one psalm), 25, 34, 37, 111, 112, and 145. Moreover, Psalm 1 begins with a word starting with

aleph ("blessed") and ends with a word starting with tav ("perish").

The description of the Bride of the King, Lady Wisdom, in Proverbs 31:10-31 is alphabetical, proceeding verse by verse through the Hebrew alphabet. Each of the first four chapters of Lamentations is alphabetical. Chapter 3 of Lamentations has three verses for each letter: aleph, aleph, aleph, beth, beth, beth, etc. Nahum 1:2-8 is an incomplete alphabet.

If we take note of the themes of these alphabetical passages, we find that they are all very relevant to Revelation. Several focus on God's Word. Loyalty to God's Word brings blessing, while disloyalty brings judgment. Such are Psalm 1 and 119, and also Psalm 37 (an expansion of Psalm 1).

Several focus on God's judgments. God provides a complete alphabet of judgment in Lamentations 1-4 and Nahum 1. It is a happy thought that God's alphabet of judgment is broken in Lamentations 5, providing hope that He will not sustain His wrath against His people forever. God's judgment is given an alphabet of praise in Psalm 34.

Proverbs 31:10-31 focuses on the Bride. The woman here is not merely a good wife, for what wife could ever do all that this woman does! This is the wife of a king, the Lady Wisdom of Proverbs 1-9, the opposite of Harlot Folly. The alphabet of the Bride is fully related to Christ's Bride of Revelation 21-22.

Psalm 25 is a prayer in the face of danger, a prayer that God will help us persevere in the face of temptation and tribulation. This is an important theme in Revelation.

Finally, Psalms 111 and 145 are alphabets of praise to God for His faithfulness and attributes, and Psalm 112 is an alphabet of blessing for the faithful saints.

Thus, God's Word embraces all reality and all history. The Alphabet of God's existence is the standard by which we are judged and by which we live and find joy. It is the standard for His Bride (Proverbs 31). It is the vocabulary of His praise (Psalms 111 & 145). It is the description of His blessings, which are as wide as the alphabet of God's totality (Psalm 112). And, as in Psalm 25, God's alphabet of totality is something we can call upon in time of need.

God's alphabetic attribute is His sovereign rule. The Father has given this alphabet to the Son. It is the book that the Son receives from the Father. Thus, it is the Son who is here called "Alpha and Omega." He was the Almighty, the I Am, and the Lord God in the Old Creation. Now He is the Alphabet of all human life and of all existence.

(End of quotation from my studies in Revelation.)

Sight and Hearing

If I were to ask you which you would rather lose, your sight or your hearing, chances are good that you would rather lose your hearing. Biblically speaking, however, we should much prefer to lose our sight. It is because we are sinners that we prefer sight to hearing. This goes back to Adam's sin in the Garden. Eve, with Adam standing by and approving, *saw* that the fruit of the Tree of Knowledge was beautiful, good for food, and desirable, and based on her *sight* she ignored God's *word* of command not to eat of it. From that time on, people have been born into the world sinfully relying on sight more than on hearing. (Thanks to the Rev. Rich Bledsoe for the insights in this paragraph.)

But if you reflect upon it, you will realize that sight is not very accurate. For one thing, looking at another person tells you virtually nothing about him. You may think I have a beard because I'm a hippie, but the real reason might be that I agree with R. J. Rushdoony's odd notion that God commands men to have beards! Or I might have a beard to hide a disfigured face, or because my skin breaks out when I shave. The real reason, if you want to know, is that my wife likes my beard, and so do I, and that's all there is to it.

How do we learn about another person? By hearing what he or she has to say. Language reveals the inside of another person, something sight can never do. A person may lie, and use language to conceal, but that is only the opposite of revealing; and the fact is that a liar is indeed revealing *himself*. Thus, if we want to learn about God, we must hear His Word. Looking at Him, if that were possible, would not tell us anything. After all, Satan can appear as an angel of light, while God appeared as a disfigured man dying on a cross.

To take another example, consider the Rodney King beating of a couple of years ago. Everyone in the

United States saw the videotape of a group of Los Angeles police beating Mr. King repeatedly with sticks, over and over, far beyond what anyone would think is reasonable law enforcement. It was completely clear that the police were out of control, and everyone judged them guilty. Seeing is believing. But, when the matter went to court, what was heard in testimony was quite different. First, King was hit with batons, which bounce back when they strike; he was not struck with sticks. Second, most of the blows were struck on the ground around King to try and subdue him. Third, King had lunged at the police, and had already taken some taser rounds, yet was still coming on. He seemed to have tremendous strength, and had to be subdued. A very careful and precise viewing of the videotape bore this out. The jury found the police not guilty (though since this was politically unacceptable, later kangaroo courts were set up to find them guilty anyway!). Now, even if I haven't got all the facts straight here, the point I'm making is clear: seeing is not believing!

In his writings on linguistics and the nature of man, Eugen Rosenstock-Huessy has pointed out that sight deals with things, while hearing deals with persons. Sight has to do with science, with observation, with objectivity. Hearing has to do with personal relationships, with subjectivity.

Man wants to turn God into an object, something we have under control. This is of the essence of Original Sin, and we all have this tendency. It is the great Achilles' Heel of theology, that we talk about God too much and treat Him as an object. True theology must be conducted as prayer, and this is the great lesson of Augustine's *Confessions*, for the whole book is written as a prayer. When we set up icons, or supposedly "consecrate" bread and wine into the body and blood of Christ, we have turned God into an object or force, and we have made the essential first step to depersonalizing and taking control of God.

Because of this, all true liturgy is verbal, not visual. Nowhere does Bible command acts of obeisance before any manmade object. The Bible never shows anyone rightly doing any such thing. (In 2 Kings 5:18-19, Naaman makes it clear that his bowing is simply to help the king, not an action of his own, and is given permission to do it. Notice, though, that Naaman was very concerned about this matter. He did not want to bow at all.) The Bible expressly forbids it, and threatens a great curse on those who do it. Because of this, the Eastern Orthodox, Roman Catholic, and Anglo-Catholic churches are not liturgical churches; they are anti-liturgical.

The Silence of Images

Pagan religion is shrine religion. People go individually to a shrine or temple and make obeisance before an image. This is a very convenient kind of religion, because images do not speak. Thus, they can never challenge us to repentance. They simply reinforce Original Sin at all levels of life. To the extent that this kind of wickedness enters the Church, to that extent sin is not challenged and human beings defile God and one another.

How nice it is to go into a Church and tell our sins to some statue or crucifix or "reserved host"! Such things will never talk back to us. The Biblical doctrine of the priesthood of all believers teaches exactly the opposite: We must talk to other believers, who will inconveniently and annoyingly talk back to us!

Because iconic religion is essentially silent, it does not build community. People in the three iconolatrous churches will go individually to a shrine, or to some shrine set up inside the church building itself, and do their own private thing there. This privatization of worship extends to the performance of what is left of the Christian liturgy. For centuries, the Roman Catholic liturgy was conducted in Latin, leaving each individual to his or her own thoughts. When people go forward to a rail to receive the sacrament, they are essentially completely alone. In the Bible, the Lord's Supper is celebrated as a meal, around a table, with the saints looking at one another; for it is the communion of the Church, not merely individuals, with God and with one another.

The result of iconolatry is *cruelty*. When we don't continually interface with other people at something of a deep religious level, we become callous. Human rights have never been of much concern in Roman Catholic and Eastern Orthodox countries, which is why the false hopes of communism and liberation theology have been strong in them, and it is no surprise that the rise of Anglo-Catholicism was accompanied by the rise of a militaristic and anti-Christian imperialism in Great Britain that treated colonial blacks and East Indians with contempt. Happily the Methodist movement within the Church of England acted as a counter to this tendency. Social justice arises out of Word-centered Christianity, and in the modern era that has meant Protestantism. The Puritans and the Scottish Presbyterians, for instance, treated the aboriginals they encountered quite differently.

The connection between iconolatry and oppression is clearly made in the Bible, for it was during the period

of the Kings that the violation of the Second Word became the main sin, and along with that the prophets repeatedly condemned the people for oppressing the poor, the widow, and the outsider.

Hearing and Authority

When I use my eyes, I am in complete control of the information that comes to me, for I can shut my eyes. I can shut my eyes in the face of an icon. If I read the Bible to myself, I can shut my eyes and stop reading.

The Bible does not say to read the Word of God but to *hear* it. This means someone else must read it for me to hear it. This means that Biblical religion cannot be individualistic but must be corporate. We cannot worship God silently at a shrine; we must be with others and hear them, and speak so that they hear us. But the ear is unlike the eye. I cannot shut my ear. The only way I can stop the sound is to leave the room.

This is because sound, unlike sight, makes a physical impact upon me. Sound is bodily, physical, while sight is mental. We are physically impacted only by very bright light. Paganism, which depreciates the physical body, also depreciates the hearing of words. Paganism goes for sight, for an image has no physical effect upon me.

But hearing also involves submission to authority. When I listen to you, I am yielding authority to you. I am allowing you to speak to me. When you listen back to me, you yield authority to me. Thus, speaking involves the mutual yielding of authority. Speaking and hearing involve mutual submission. Mutual respect and submission is the essence of community, and the only way I can get away from hearing you is to leave the room, to leave the community and go off by myself.

Seeing leaves me in complete control. I submit to nobody. The silent image only reflects back my own preconceived ideas to me. Instead of changing me, the image reinforces what I already am and think. No growth, no sanctification is possible.

Because hearing involves submission to authority, community becomes possible. Those who speak best have the most authority. They may be experts, and we listen to them. They may be elders, whose age reflects years of experience, and so we listen to them. In this way, culture and civilization become possible.

Of course, to one degree or another, all cultures have this aspect of hearing and mutual submission. God has said, however, that Christian culture is to maximize this dimension of life through the priesthood of all believers and the elimination of all counterfeits, all image worship.

Image-worshipping cultures have a high degree of anarchy, especially in religion. Real worship is individual obeisance at a shrine or temple. The isolated monk is regarded as a holy man, while in true Christianity, isolation is a great evil and monks should be viewed with grave suspicion. Some monks, even within Christianity, practice vows of silence, which surely is a vast perversion of God's design. Celibacy and virginity are regarded highly, while in Biblical religion it is the married state that is celebrated as the highest expression of Godly life. "It is not good for the man to be alone," said God, speaking of Adam as priest of the Garden. Only a married man, living in that most frustrating of all communities (marriage and family), can acquire the wisdom to guide the Church of God.

Because of the largely anarchical and individualistic character of religion in image-worshipping cultures, whether pagan or semi-Christian, the unifying point in society becomes the state. By way of contrast, in Christian societies, where the "one anothering" of verbal interchange and mutual submission is central, the state declines as a unifying force and society becomes free and open.

(to be continued)

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No. 34: The Second Word II: Seeing & Hearing; Exposition

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Hearing, Seeing, and History

God is Word, not picture. He speaks, but He is not visible in Himself. Thus, God initiates history through language. He speaks the world into existence, and speaks to us to bring us out of formlessness and emptiness into the fullness of being His Bride. Similarly, we speak words that direct our lives and our children after us. Thus, language initiates history.

Sight, by way of contrast, comes at the end. We can "look back" over what we have experienced and understand it, while we often don't understand what God is doing to us as we go through His course of instruction. Reason, therefore, comes at the end, not at the beginning.

To say, "In the beginning was the Reason," the notion of Gordon Clark, is completely wrong. Rather, "In the beginning was the Language, the Spoken Word." This is the alpha of history. "At the end will be Reason, Understanding." That is the omega of history.

Reason is the sight of the mind. Jesus said to the High Priest, "Hereafter you will see the Son of Man sitting at the right hand of Power, coming on the clouds of heaven" (Matthew 26:64). Caiaphas did not see this with his physical eyes, but he was made to understand it by the events that followed.

We respond to language by faith, for we cannot see at the beginning how things will turn out at the end. Thus, we submit to God's Word by faith. Because of this, reason is not the right tool to make men Christians. Reason only comes afterwards. As Augustine rightly said, "I believe in order to understand."

Similarly, at the end we shall see Him. We do not see Him in the beginning; rather, we hear Him. There was nothing to see at Mount Sinai but dark clouds. Ezekiel and Daniel saw something like the form of a man. The disciples actually saw God in the flesh, but then Jesus went to heaven, out of their sight as Acts 1:9 explicitly says. The new Kingdom set up by Jesus is a new creation, a new start, a new initiation. The completed Bible is the Language, the Word, that starts the world anew. Once again there is nothing to see. Sight will come only at the end.

It is true that since the Bible has been completed, there is a place for reason to look back over it. The Bible begins with law and ends with the Pauline epistles, which contain much reasoned argument from history. Similarly, the more we progress in history, the more we shall understand, and the greater role reason will play. But we must never lose the foundation of law and command. We shall not understand it all in this world, and so must always be grounded in faith in God's Word.

Thus, sight does not move us forward in history and maturation and sanctification and development. Rather, it is the Law-Word of God that always provokes historical development. We are told to resist the tendency to end history by living and worshipping in terms of sight. And indeed, wherever sight has taken over, as in Eastern Orthodoxy most obviously, history is regarded as ended. For the Orthodox, the so-called Seven Ecumenical Councils, of which the demand for iconolatrous worship was the last, are regarded as ending all that needs to be accomplished by the Church.

The Second Word

With these prefatory remarks out of the way, let us now consider precisely what is stated in the Second Word. This commandment is often misinterpreted as stating that no picture of God can be made. This is not what it says. What it says is that no image of anything can be set up as an avenue of worship to God and the court of heaven.

You shall not make for yourself a carving, and any similitude of what is in heaven above or on the earth beneath or in the waters under the earth: You shall not prostrate to them and you shall not serve them;

For I, Yahweh your God, am a Jealous God,

Visiting the iniquity of the fathers on the children to the third and fourth of those who hate Me,

But showing lovingkindness to thousands, to those who love Me and guard My orders.

It is impossible to separate the command "You shall not prostrate to them" from what precedes. If it were an additional, coordinate thought, it would begin with "and." Thus, it is wrong to isolate the first command and say that God forbade the Israelites to make any images of any created thing, period. After all, the Tabernacle and Temple were full of images. The focus of the command is on prostrating to and serving images.

The simplest read of the Hebrew is as I have given it above, and as it is found in English Bibles. Based on the meaning of the commandment and a possible parallel to the Fourth Word, I should like to suggest an alternate read of the first part:

You shall not make for yourself a carving.

Indeed, any similitude of what is in heaven above or on the earth beneath or in the waters under the earth: You shall not prostrate to them and you shall not serve them.

The Fourth Word begins with a short command, which is then expanded into a longer command, and followed by an explanation. I suggest that the same structure is intended for the Second Word.

I also suggest this because of the meaning of the word "carving" in the first phrase. "Making a carving" is explained by prostrating and serving any manmade similitude of a created thing. This emerges from the fact that there is another "carving" or *pesel* in the book of Exodus: the Ten Words, which God carved with His own finger. The verb "hew out" in Exodus 34:1 & 4 and Deuteronomy 10:1 & 3 is the verbal form of same word.

Thus, the idea is not that of a "graven" image as opposed to a "molten" image or a "painted" image. The idea is that of a manmade graven object versus the God-made graven Word. The opposition is between God's content-filled graven Words and man's silent graven images. The opposition of God's verbal covenant and man's graven images is set out in greater detail in Deuteronomy 4:15-31, which we shall take up below.

These passages are virtually the only places where this Hebrew word is used in the Pentateuch, and almost the only places it is used in the whole Hebrew Bible. In only a few places are "graven" images set next to "molten" images. In the passages we are considering, the opposition is man's engraving versus God's.

For this reason, it seems to me that the essential command is: You shall not make for yourself a *pesel*. The second section of the commandment serves to amplify and explain this basic command.

God's *pesel*, His covenant Word, is how He relates to us and we relate to Him. That relationship is verbal because it is personal. It is God-initiated.

When men set up a *pesel* it is always man-initiated. Thus, all three iconolatrous churches (Rome, Orthodoxy, Anglo-Catholicism) are essentially Pelagian. They start with man. Man makes the move toward God. Original Sin is downplayed. Man's works "merit the merit of Christ." Man engages in ascetic exercises to lift himself up to God. This is the essence of paganism. Augustinians within these traditions seek to explain these Pelagian trends and to put a good face on them, but the Pelagian tendency always wins out and is never fully rejected.

The worship of man's *pesel* is not a conversation with God, but prostration before a manmade object, such as the communion elements or the cross.

Form

The word I have translated "form," often rendered "likeness," is the Hebrew word *tmunah*. It is not the normal word for likeness, as can be seen from Deuteronomy 4:16, which uses both words. *Tmunah* only occurs nine times in the Hebrew Bible. An examination of these passages will help locate the general nuance and meaning of this term and why it is used in the Second Word.

In Numbers 12:8, Moses is said to see the form of God. This refers to Exodus 33:23, where God said that Moses cannot see His "face" but only His "back." When, however, God passed by Moses, God proclaimed His name (Exodus 34:6-7). It seems that this long descriptive name is the "back" of God's name, for which the "face" is the overwhelming "I Am That I Am." However the case may be, we cannot fail to notice that the emphasis shifts from seeing to hearing. God had already made just this point in Exodus 33:18-20, for when Moses initially asked to see God's glory, He responded by saying that He would make His goodness pass before Moses and would proclaim His name.

Back to Numbers 12:6-8, we find that the entire passage concerns verbal revelation:

If there is a prophet [who speaks for] Yahweh among you,

I shall make Myself known to him in a vision.

I shall speak with him in a dream.

Not so with My servant Moses:

He is faithful in all My household.

With him I speak mouth to mouth,

Even openly, and not in dark sayings,

And he beholds the form of Yahweh.

The contrast is that Moses hears God "mouth to mouth," while the later prophets will hear God in visions and dreams and dark sayings. Then God says that Moses beholds Yahweh's form. It seems pretty clear that beholding Yahweh's form means having a clear revelation from God. In a sense, the completion of the Bible means that the form of God has been revealed to us, for as long as the Bible was incomplete it was somewhat of a "dark saying."

We have seen from Exodus 33-34 that Moses did *not* see God's face, and surely if seeing God's form meant something visual, it would mean looking directly at God. Thus, when Numbers 12 says that Moses does see God's form, and explicates this in terms of verbal revelation, we should understand it verbally. That is, Moses did not see God's form visually, but he beheld it with the eyes of faith in God's spoken Word.

The word *tmunah* occurs five times in Deuteronomy 4 (vv. 12, 15, 16, 23, 25). In verses 12-13, the contrast the visual and the verbal is very strongly expressed:

Then Yahweh *spoke* to you from the midst of the fire;

You *heard* the *sound of words*,

But you **saw no form**, only a *voice*.

So He *declared* to you His *covenant*,

Which He *commanded* you to perform,

The Ten *Words*,

And He *wrote* them on two tablets of stone.

Verses 15-16 begin to expose the motivation for the production of icons: "So watch yourselves carefully, since you did not see any form on the day Yahweh spoke to you at Horeb from the midst of the fire; lest you act corruptly and make a *pesel* for yourselves in the likeness of any figure, the likeness of male or female, etc." Somehow the motivation for setting up a graven image is related to the invisibility of God. We don't want an invisible God. And once again, the contrast is between the God who spoke at Horeb and the creation of silent images.

Notice what this verse does not say. It does not say, "Do not make an image of God, since you saw no form of God at Horeb." This command is not directly a prohibition on depictions of God Himself. Rather, what is prohibited is the creation of a contact-point with God in the likeness of other creatures.

This is important. Nowhere in the Hebrew Bible do we find people falling into a sin of making images of God Himself. Rather, they make images of creatures and set these up as mediators to God. If the Second Word forbade worshipping images of God, it would be prohibiting something the Israelites were evidently not tempted to do. When they rejected God, of course, they worshipped other gods, and set up images to them; but when they paid lip service to God, they did not set up any images of Him. The images are designed as mediating agents to the invisible God.

The contrasts are clear. God initiates the mediation between Himself and us, and He controls it. The idolater seeks to initiate mediation between himself and God, which he can control. God's mediation is verbal and usually invisible, the Word of God, ultimately the Incarnate Word. Manmade mediators are visual and silent. God's mediation is His *pesel*, the Word. Manmade mediators are images.

Seeing God's Form in the Resurrection

Will we ever see God? In some sense, yes. The last use of *tmunah* in the Bible speaks of it. Psalm 17:15 reads, "As for me, I shall behold Your face in righteousness; I shall be satisfied with Your form when I

awake." That is, in the resurrection we shall behold God's form with our new eyes.

This introduces a new consideration that is most important for understanding the Second Word. It is that seeing God is a good thing, but it is not for now. God tells us not to try and do it until He is ready to let us. We find exactly the same thing in Genesis 1-3, where God said that every tree would be for Adam and Eve to eat, and every tree in the garden is said to be good for food. Thus, the prohibition on the Tree of Knowledge was temporary. Adam and Eve were to develop patience by responding to God's "NO." By eating the fruit, they rejected God's plan for growth and development, and became corrupt. Similarly, sex is good, but we are not to indulge in it until we are married.

Now, seeing God face to face is a good thing, and if we are faithful, we shall enjoy the "beatific vision" in the resurrection. But God has clearly and unmistakably said that we are not to attempt to see Him in this world. Jesus said, "It is good for you that I go away." We cannot see God now, and the attempt to do so is a replication of Original Sin.

God strictly forbids any attempt to make a "form" that connects us to Him visually. God will let us see Him when He is ready, and when we are. To set up an icon and say that this gives us a visual revelation of God or of some dimension of God's heavenly existence, is to jump the gun. It is the same as seizing the forbidden fruit. It is the same as having sex before marriage. It is fornication and adultery.

We are to be satisfied with the Word, because the Word is ultimate. God is Word, but He is not visible. What we shall see is God's voluntary self-presentation, not God Himself. But God's Word is not just His voluntary self-presentation; it is God Himself. Thus, the visual is always secondary. To insist on the visual is to despise God's Word, and thus to despise God. Accordingly, those who set up images are said to "hate" God.

We develop patience as we respond to the "no"s of life, and patience is of the essence of faith (Hebrews 6:12-15). Adam and Eve, by seizing what they were not yet given, rejected personal maturity and destroyed the possibility of historical maturation for their posterity. Similarly, those who break the Second Word by indulging in visual worship have proven impatient. They have rejected personal maturity, and have destroyed their posterity. By the third and fourth generation, their seed will have become so corrupt that some kind of new Flood will be necessary. Thus, there can be no personal or cultural maturity apart from the strict keeping of the Second Word.

There was never any excuse for Israel to set up other mediators, because God was near at hand. They were without excuse, but the fact is that they did not want God as Mediator because God was not under their control. Unfortunately, some parts of the Church similarly violate the Second Word and rejoice in doing so. They are not satisfied with Christ as Mediator, and insist on having heavenly saints as mediators as well. Icons are set up to mediate to the saints. All of these practices reveal a dissatisfaction with God, for if we have God, why do we want all these other things?

(to be continued)

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No. 35: The Second Word III: Exposition; Implications

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Prostration

God has designed the human body in a marvelous way, and Biblical religion is very physical. We believe in the resurrection of the body, against all pagan ideas of the immortality of the soul. We bury our bodies, not burning them. Human beings in their totality, including our bodies, are the images of God and are designed to serve Him.

When we sit down we are in a position of rest and judgment. We don't sit to receive orders. We sit to evaluate. Our body is designed to fall backwards into this position.

The fullest position of rest is reclining. We recline to sleep and to make love. The disciples reclined with Jesus at the Last Supper. Sitting or reclining, positions of rest, are the only appropriate postures for the communion meal.

We stand to receive orders. We stand because we are ready for action, ready for obedience. God has made our bodies this way.

We can also fall forwards, prostrating ourselves. This is the posture of humility, submission, and adoration.

And so, we kneel for the confession of sin in worship, stand to hear the Word, sit to evaluate the sermon (Acts 17:11, and recline to eat the communion meal.

Thus, the Second Word is intensely physical. The iconolaters in the semi-Christian churches maintain that when they bow and adore icons and statues and crosses and sacraments, they are only rendering "second class" worship, veneration not adoration. They say that their mental attitude is right, so that their body's posture does not matter. This is not the attitude of Biblical religion; it is the attitude of paganism.

The Biblical, authentically Christian worldview says that our body influences our mind, just as our mind influences our body. This is obvious to us when we are tired and cannot think well, or if we are on drugs or have drunk too much alcohol. But it is also true, for instance, that if we sit for prayer we will not understand prayer very well. It is also true, for instance, that if we kneel for communion we shall never understand very much about the meaning of the communion meal.

Moreover, if we kneel for communion, eventually we are all too likely to wind up adoring the communion elements, which are nothing but bread and wine. The Bible never provides any rite for consecrating bread and wine so as to turn them into Christ's body and blood in some sense. Rather, the Bible says that Christ's body and blood are really and mystically given to us as we eat the communion meal.

Thus, the body and its postures are important, very important. They are important enough that God has attached great curses to moving the body in the wrong way: bowing before manmade objects in worship. The only way to get around this law of God is to do what the heretical churches have done: adopt a pagan view of the relationship of mind and body.

The Curse & Blessing of the Second Word

The most horrible of all curses is found connected to violations of the Second Word. For this reason alone, I believe that no one in his right mind would consider going into the iconolatrous churches. God says that those who set up images and prostrate to them, as a way supposedly of worshipping Him, are in reality guilty of hating Him. He says that they are spiritual adulterers, who provoke Him to jealousy. He says that He will curse their children to the third and fourth generation. By way of contrast, those who resist this temptation will be blessed for thousands of generations! In the light of such horrible threats, we should be very, very careful what we bow down to!

God says that those who bow to icons and sacraments hate Him. To hate means to treat with contempt. God has set up the wonderful covenant as a means to have conversation with us, but we prefer to bow to

silent images!

God says that He is jealous, and this is the language of marriage in the Bible (Numbers 5). Suppose a man says that he loves his wife, but spends all his time drooling over the centerfolds of *Playboy* magazine. Does he love her or has he betrayed her? If we love our wife, we converse with her; the fact that so many marriages are silent is proof of the depth of our Original Sin, and is something we must fight. But now we set up pictures of other women, and say that they remind us of our wife. We masturbate in front of these pictures, and say that it is almost the same as making love to our wife. We say that the affection we give to these pictures "rises up" to our wife. It does not matter that she has told us to get rid of these things! That is exactly how God regards image-worship. No wonder God hates it, and no wonder he regards those who do it as hating Him!

The fact that judgment runs down to the third and fourth generation is significant. It means that the results of breaking the Second Word are not immediately obvious. Protestants who go into Rome, Orthodoxy, or Anglo-Catholicism still retain their knowledge of the Bible. They still have some moral discipline. And since these churches are not completely idolatrous, there is some reinforcement of the Word of God to be found in them. The corruption of iconic worship, however, will become clear by the fourth generation, for a culture will emerge that is cruel and degraded. Men who move their families into these semi-Christian churches doom their children and grandchildren.

Why Do Men Make Idols?

When a pagan or a semi-Christian makes an idol or an icon, he knows full well that he has not created a god. Rather, he believes that his image somehow captures some of God's divine "being" and thus establishes a link between himself and God, or between himself and the saint. It is the same as voodoo. The voodoo priest makes a doll to represent you. He energizes the doll by getting some of your hair or blood and putting it into the doll. Then, when he sticks a needle into the doll, you are supposed to feel the pain.

I recall when I was young and for a few years attended a Roman Catholic parochial school, the Catholic kids would buy holy cards, which were sort of like religious baseball cards but with pictures of saints on them. Then they would ask the priest to bless the cards. This made the cards "special." It was implied, if not always stated, that this blessing energized the card and made it a special telephone to the saint.

For an icon in the Eastern Church to be a real icon it has to be made by a consecrated monk, using consecrated wood and pigments, and properly consecrated. Thereafter it has captured some of the essence or being of the saint it portrays, and is a window to that saint. It is not true that the icons are just pictures to remind us of our older brothers and sisters in heaven.

The consecrationist view of the sacraments says that after the priest has consecrated the bread and wine, they become in some mystical sense the body and blood of Christ. Thus, they may be held up and adored, prayed to, etc. You want to keep some of the leftover consecrated bread in the church so that people can come in and have "conversations with the blessed sacrament." In authentic Christianity, there is no rite of consecration of bread and wine. Rather, Jesus told us to give thanks for it, and we receive Him, really and mystically, as we eat it. But the bread remains bread and the wine remains wine.

All of these perverse teachings are based on a pagan view of existence. These doctrines treat persons as if they were impersonal forces or objects. Instead of relating to God personally through conversation, we get some of God's "being" and stuff it into bread and wine and bow down to it. This notion views God as a Thing, not as a Person. Similarly, the notion that we can capture part of the saintness of the saint and put it into an icon treats the saint not as a person but as a thing. Voodoo does the same thing, but treats living people this way, seeking to create an impersonal, mechanical link to another person by means of the doll and hair.

These objects are not viewed as gods, thus, but as mediators or links to God. They are essentially mechanical, impersonal links. They are false mediators, counterfeits of the Second Person of the Trinity, the Word of God. Man does not want God Himself as a Mediator, because God is not under our control. We want to create our own mediators.

Romans 1:18 says that men suppress the truth. To suppress the truth, men must know it. Thus, part of the essence of Original Sin is self-deception. Iconic religion participates in this self-deception in a very obvious way. The iconolater creates an object that supposedly links him to God or to a saint. Such a heavenly being is supposed to have authority over us, but these icons are silent, and thus have no authority over us at all. If anything is obvious it is that these objects have nothing to do with God or heavenly authorities at all. They cannot, for they cannot give us orders or counsel. Yet the iconolater, in his self-deception, thinks that these silent things, which he has set up, are links to heavenly authorities. It escapes his sin-darkened mind that this is completely contradictory.

The reason the iconolater is determined to live with this self-contradiction is that he must be in control. He must be the one to make the mediator, and the mediator must be silent so that he can keep control of his own life. This is the opposite of the true state of affairs, revealed in authentic Christianity. God has set up the Mediator, and the Mediator is anything but silent! We are not in control of who the Mediator is or how He has effected our salvation. And when we submit to the Mediator, we must hear His Word, which has supreme authority over us and constantly rebukes our sinful tendencies.

Thus, to summarize:

In Christianity,

God sets up the Mediator.

The Mediator is verbal, not visual.

We must listen and be changed.

In paganism and semi-Christianity,

Man sets up the mediators by making images.

The mediators are visual, not verbal.

The mediators are silent, so we are not changed.

Now, the semi-Christian churches think that we can have both the Bible and images, both the Word and silent bowing to manmade objects. God has said no to this. God tells us in the Bible over and over again that if we try to do both we are adulterers, married to God but masturbating with idols. (Since idols are not real, we cannot fornicate with them, we can only masturbate with them. Does my language offend you? Good, it should! This is how God views it!)

Since these churches have both, there are people in them that focus on the Bible rather than on bowing to objects. We can rejoice in this, and some writers and thinkers in these traditions have genuine insights into God's plan for history. Because they have mixed Christianity with paganism, however, there is only so far they can go.

Idolatry and Iconolatry

The Bible shows us that any attempt to worship God through images is treated by Him as idolatry. Those who use images claim to worship Yahweh, but in fact worship a figment of their own imaginations. Today the Jehovah's Witnesses claim to worship the God of the Bible, but we know that they worship a false god of their own invention.

For this reason, the Protestant Reformers rightly said that when men set up artifacts and bow down to them, claiming to worship the God of Christianity, they are actually worshipping a false God of their own devising. They hate the real God, setting Him aside for one they have made.

Sins against the Second Word come into existence when it is no longer possible to break the First Word openly. In the first phase of Israel under the Law, the Israelites tended to worship other gods, as throughout the period of the Judges. By the time of the Kingdom, however, it had become clearly established that Yahweh was the God of Israel. Forsaking Yahweh and worshipping other gods by name was no longer a likely avenue for the sinful heart to follow. But it was possible to worship Yahweh hypocritically.

Breaking the Second Word is hypocrisy at its most blatant. The Israelites set up shrines and little temples on high places, and put in these shrines objects representing the lesser gods who were said to be in Yahweh's court: Baal, Asherah, etc. There might be a golden calf to represent the focal point of mediation to Yahweh. People would go to the shrines and leave gifts to buy favors from these lesser gods, just as the semi-Christians light candles and incense to icons and statues today. Thus, while giving lip service to Yahweh as God, the actual religious practice focused on the service of manmade mediators. This was the awful "sin of Jeroboam the son of Nebat who caused Israel to sin."

This is hypocrisy because it is claiming to worship God while doing exactly what He has explicitly ordered us not to do. There can be no more extreme form of hypocrisy.

Men are naturally idolaters. They worship anything but the true God. Once the true God reveals Himself, it is natural for sinners to stray from Him. Common sense tells us that one of the foremost ways to stray from the true Yahweh is to invent a false Yahweh. We still get to speak of the Trinity, of Christ, of Jesus, etc., but we invest these terms with false meaning. This is what Mormons and Jehovah's Witnesses do, for instance. Now, what did Yahweh say to Israel to be the test by which they would know if they were worshipping the true Yahweh or a false Yahweh? It was the Second Word. If they set up images and

worshipped at or through them, they were worshipping a false Yahweh of their own imagination. This is why iconolatry is just disguised idolatry. Worshipping "Yahweh" on high places, or worshipping "Yahweh" at the calves, or worshipping "Yahweh" while rendering service to various baals (powers, saints), all of these are idolatrous because this "Yahweh" does not exist.

How can I know that my worship is acceptable to God? I can relax and offer Him my praise as long as I don't venerate any manmade object.

What About Catholics?

Of course, the semi-Christian churches recognize the possibility of false Christs, but they only recognize them doctrinally. Thus, Mormons and Jehovah's Witnesses hold to a false Christ. This is one valid approach to the question, but when it is the only approach to recognizing a false Christ, it betrays the influence of gnosticism and intellectualism. Another approach, and the one the Bible emphasizes, is worship. Worship shows our hearts, which are deceptive. Our hearts deceive *us*. How, then, can we know our hearts? The Bible says that if we venerate manmade objects we are not worshipping the true God, and that is evidence that our hearts probably "hate" God. It may feel right to us, but our hearts cannot be trusted. Man can only look on the outward appearance, and that means I can only see my own outward appearance. I cannot discern my own heart. God has, thus, graciously given me outward signs by which I can assess myself. The Second Word is preeminent among them.

So, should we regard Roman Catholics, Anglo-Catholics, and Eastern Orthodox people as Christians? The Reformers treated their baptisms as legitimate but their practices as corrupted by idolatry. The Reformers recognized that the Bible distinguishes between sins of being misled from high-handed sins. People who grow up in such cultures may never really and effectively be challenged to set aside such damaging practices. People converted from paganism to Roman Catholicism may come into the Church because they want Christ, the Bible, the Church, the worship of God, etc. They get some "barnacles" along with it, and they accept these because they don't know any better. We should give them the judgment of charity.

But what of people who forsake authentic Christianity and go into Rome or Orthodoxy or Anglo-Catholicism? What about Scott Hahn and Frankie Schaeffer? They men already had Christ, the Bible, the Church, the sacraments, true worship, etc. But they wanted something else. They wanted idols. They have yielded to the idolatry of their hearts. They are apostates. I do not believe we can give them the same judgment of charity, though all judgment ultimately rests with God, and He will deal with them.

The Protestant Church today is dying in many ways, and some people become so frustrated with it, and become so enamored with the seeming strength of the Vatican or the seeming strength of Orthodox tradition, that they go into one or the other. This is a foolish decision, one that is essentially sinful. Still, we have to have some charity in some such cases. When the shepherd (authentic Christianity) is struck, the sheep sometimes scatter.

(to be continued)

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No. 36: The Second Word IV: Implications

Posted By [James B. Jordan](#) On December 1, 1994 @ 12:00 am In [Rite Reasons Newsletter](#) | [Comments Disabled](#)

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What About Catholics? (continued)

Usually, such people are not seeking graven images, but rather their idolatry is of a broader character. They are seeking a home on earth. Scott Hahn's book is called *Rome Sweet Home*. This is the essential sin, for there is no home on earth. The Church is not our home; God is our Home. We live now in a pilgrimage toward our home. The Church is a prophetic institution, calling us forward. To a very limited extent, the Church pictures God's home for us, but the Church may never be treated as our home. If we view the Church as home, we have put the Church in the place of God. We have made the Bride into God.

If we want the Church to be home, we are scandalized by all the tribulation in the Church. But the epistles make it clear that the Church is full of trial and tribulation. Those who want to find a home in the Church are those who want to get away from trial and conflict. They don't want to be stuck in the wilderness, so they compromise with the Canaanites to get into the land. They don't want to be out in the woods with David, so they compromise to be at Saul's court. They want comfort, not conflict.

Of course, all of us want comfort, not conflict. But the Bible tells us that we shall not get to Comfort until we get to God in heaven. In this world, we shall have tribulation. If we decide to flee the tribulation of the collapsing Protestant Church, and go into an iconolatrous church, we have left the true faith. God may treat this as a sin of wandering, and take us to heaven anyway, but we must surely not approve of it.

Returning to the subject of iconolatry, this is how I have come to think about it. The sinful heart of unregenerate man, which persists in Christians as the "flesh," hates God and wants to bow to manmade objects. The righteous converted heart wants to converse with God and be challenged by His Word. The Second Word of the Ten Words is given as a severe warning against yielding to the temptation to act out our hatred of God. But all Christians both love and hate God, though real Christians love God more than they hate Him. In authentic Christianity, the very possibility of expressing our hatred through iconolatry is abolished. In the inauthentic semi-Christian churches, however, we find both Word and icon, statue, bowing to crosses and sacraments, etc. Thus, we have to say that such churches are, as such, in deep sin. Individuals within such churches may be, and often are, real Christians who love God more than they hate Him. Because these churches encourage iconolatrous practices, these Christians are led into confusion and do things they should not do. Yet, if they love the Word more than the icon, they are real Christians. We should encourage them to break their icons and become consistent, to grow in grace and holiness.

Bowing to Men

The Second Word does not forbid bowing to men. In fact, given the mutual submission that arises in a verbal, Christian, society, bowing to one another becomes an important aspect of life (Genesis 23:7 & 12). In Christian societies, men bow to one another; in paganism, men bow to rulers, but rulers do not bow to them.

We can bow to other human beings, and indeed prostrate ourselves before rulers, because they are not manmade objects. Human beings are the very image of God, and are made by God. Icons are not the image of God, and are made by man. Venerating human beings is veneration of the image of God. Venerating icons is the veneration of man's work.

Religious Art

The Second Word does not prohibit all art. It only prohibits bowing to art in worship.

The Second Word does not prohibit depictions of Biblical scenes. No one has ever been tempted to bow

down before a depiction of the whole scene of the nativity or crucifixion, or any other Biblical scene. Such depictions are essentially narrative supplements. It is not possible to think of them as encoding the personality of some dead saint or of God Himself. In the same way, nobody is tempted to get down before the television and worship while watching *Jesus of Nazareth*. There is a difference between pictures for instruction or art, and pictures for worship.

The Second Word does not prohibit art in the environment of worship. The Tabernacle and Temple included angels, pomegranates, lions, oxen, flowers, and other artistic objects. No one bowed to these things. No one talked to them. They were symbolic decorations. The house of God represented the entire world, so symbols of the world were included in it. The same can be true today.

The Second Word does not prohibit pictures of God and Jesus. Would it have been a sin for a teacher in a synagogue to draw a cloud on the blackboard as a symbol for God's presence? But with the coming of Jesus, 1 John 1:1 writes, and this was scandalous to the Jews: "What we have seen with our eyes, what we beheld and our hands handled." We don't know what Jesus looked like, and thus all pictorial representations of Him are symbolic; but since He came to be seen, there is nothing wrong with picturing His presence as a human male. Indeed, since God is essentially invisible, He must make Himself visible to us in some created form. Usually this is a man shape, as in Ezekiel 1:26. Human beings are, after all, designed as visible images of God. Thus, to portray God in human shape does no violation to Biblical theology, but in fact expresses it. Such symbolic portrayals are acceptable in art and instruction, but not as icons. For a fuller discussion, see Jeffrey Meyers's *Vere Homo: The Case for Pictures of the Lord Jesus Christ* (published by Biblical Horizons ; \$5.50).

In the Old Creation, human beings worshipped God through animal sacrifices, and thus images used in idolatrous worship were usually of animals or composites of animals and men. In the New Creation, we approach God through the Man Christ Jesus. Thus, in the New Creation, idolatry takes the form of setting up human faces and bowing to them: precisely what is found in the semi-Christian churches.

For this reason, I think it unwise to have symbolic pictures of Jesus and God in the environment of worship. History shows that men will tend to abuse these. They are not wrong per se, and perhaps eventually the Church will be mature enough not to abuse them.

Also, when we see only one picture of Christ week after week in Church, our theology becomes distorted. If there is a crucifix down front, we miss the truth of Christ as teacher, as resurrected, as ruler, etc. If there is some "gentle Jesus" down front, we will tend to forget the man who whipped the traders out of the Temple and who cursed the Pharisees and scribes. If there is a Pantocrator down front, ruling all things with unsmiling eyes, we tend to forget His compassion and nearness to us. Best therefore to keep pictures of Christ away from the intense focus of worship.

Saluting the Flag

Is it proper to salute the flag? After all, it is a manmade object, and it is not a human being. True, but it is also not used in worship. It is not a substitute or supplement to God's *pesel*, the Ten Words, and more generally, the Bible.

Moreover, "saluting" is not the same as bowing. The word "salute" originally meant "kiss." In our culture it is a gesture of loyalty and affection, not of submission. It does not violate the specific demand of the Second Word, which involves bowing and prostrating. We should, I believe, refuse to bow to or prostrate before the flag, but we are not asked to do so.

Art and Technology

All human progress, the growth of God's Daughter into a woman fit to be Christ's Bride, depends on keeping the Ten Words and the rest of the Bible. Idolatry views the creation as full of gods, because ultimately the creation ("nature" "being") is god. Thus, the pagan fears to manipulate the creation, lest he offend the spirits of trees or water or stars or ancestors. When the First Word is clearly understood, men no longer fear black cats and the number 13. They are able to manipulate the creation. They no longer see themselves under the creation, but over it as God's priests. Science, technology, and art can develop.

But breaking the Second Word sneaks idolatry in through the back door. Now men believe that their own priestly manipulation of the creation serves to mystify the creation and suck divine energy into it. As a result, the works of men's hands become mysterious, and technology and art are aborted in their development. Men see themselves as under their works, not over them.

As I wrote in *The Liturgy Trap* (p. 29): "Fourth, I believe that the second commandment channels and regulates our artistic impulses. I have mentioned the profound depths of the human personality made in God's image. It is from those profound depths that the artistic impulse arises, the impulse to function as an image of God and make things. Out of those depths comes the sinful impulse to abuse art idolatrously. The second commandment, by rigorously fixing the place of art, directs the artistic impulse properly. As images of God we are to make "worlds" that are subordinate to us, but we are never to try and make "worlds" that are superordinate to us. We can never make any kind of religious contact-point. Because liturgy is the highest form of art, it is precisely the liturgy that stands in gravest danger of iconolatrous corruption. The second commandment shows us that everything we make and do in liturgy is subordinate to us, part of the man-made things we offer to God as good works. The only things in worship that are superior to us are the things God does: Word, Sacrament, and other people (True Images). All works of our hands come behind us, not ahead of us, in worship."

Accordingly, the semi-Christian churches, especially the Eastern Churches where this is most highly developed, are little interested in technology and the arts. They view the human working with creation as a way of mystifying it, of infusing it with the "uncreated energies" of God, as the Orthodox put it. They seek to raise the world up mystically instead of developing it forward historically.

Human action does indeed transform the creation, but it does so historically, developing it as creation, growing it toward the marriage to the Son. For the Eastern Church, however, human action transforms the creation by merging it with God's "uncreated energies." Their view of transformation is not historical but mystical.

Thus, authentic Christianity and iconolatrous semi-Christianity move in opposite directions. Authentic Christianity sees any view that man and the world are merged with God as something to be avoided, as a sinful belief to be left behind. Thus, authentic Christianity becomes more and more creaturely, more and more open to God's Word, more and more of a Bride in contrast to the Divine Groom. Iconolatrous semi-Christianity, however, views the movement of history in the opposite way. For them, we are to become more and more merged with God in some mystical sense (which, of course, views God as a force or thing, not as a person to interact with). Instead of sharpening the contrast between God and man through the course of history, overcoming Original Sin and exploring what it means to be a creature under God, the iconolatrous semi-Christian view seeks to blur the contrast.

Of course, since Orthodoxy also seeks to be Christian, Orthodox theologians always safeguard the uniqueness of God by distinguishing His uncreated essence from His uncreated energies, and we must give them credit for this. Their system is, though, essentially wrongheaded, and arises precisely because they have violated God's Second Word.

Thus, it has only been in Protestantism that the sciences, arts, and technology have developed. To some extent the Renaissance also, since it affirmed the goodness of the creation, also contributed to this development. Protestant cultures, however, have been the seats of exploration of the world, scientific study, technological development and invention, and artistic diversification and enrichment.

The Golden Calf

The story of the Golden Calf, recorded in Exodus 32, is important for us to consider as we look at the meaning and implications of the Second Word. The Golden Calf is routinely misunderstood, and that is why we must consider it closely here.

Scholars of the comparative religious school sometimes say that the Golden Calf was the Egyptian Apis Bull, and that putting up an Egyptian idol was part of the idolatrous religious inheritance of Israel coming to the fore. While the Egyptian bull might be somewhat in the background here, the fact is that the Apis Bull was a living animal, not a golden idol. It is unlikely that the Israelites were simply expression Egyptian religion on this occasion.

Some have argued that the Calf represented Yahweh, others that Yahweh was seen as riding on the Calf just as He rode on the cherubim. They point out that the calf is one of the faces of the cherubim in Ezekiel 1, and that this might have been known earlier.

The problem with these views is that they do not pay attention to the explicit statement of Exodus 32:1, which points in another direction:

Now when the people saw that Moses delayed to come down from the mountain, the people assembled about Aaron and said to him, "Come, make us elohim who will go before us; as for this

Moses, the man who brought us up from the land of Egypt, we do not know what has become of him.”

The calf is a replacement for Moses. Moses was missing, and the people wanted a leader. Moses *brought them up*, now they needed a replacement to *go before* them.

They asked for an *elohim*. This word is used for God, for gods, and for men who are leaders. It essentially means “the power(s) that be.” In this passage, it means a power that will replace the leader, Moses.

Moses was the human mediator, the leader who was taking them to the promised land, who was leading them forward in history. But Moses was gone. Thus, another leader was needed.

But Moses was only one half of the mediator. The primary half was the Angel of Yahweh, who in the Pillar of Cloud and Fire had led them out, and who was going to go before them (Exodus 23:23). Moses, the human mediator, had disappeared into the Cloud, the Divine Mediator. The close connection between the two points forward, of course, to Christ, the unique God-man. It appeared that both aspects of their mediator-leader had disappeared.

Thus, the Golden Calf was a *pesel*, a manmade image that would serve as mediator to the Power of God and that would lead them to Canaan.

Why a calf? I believe the primary reason is that the calf was the greatest sacrifice in the worship system of Israel. The calf signified the High Priest and the nation as a whole (Leviticus 4). While these details had not been revealed as yet, the people already knew that there were but five sacrificial animals (Genesis 15) and that the bull was the most powerful of the five. Moreover, the bull, unlike the goat, sheep, dove, and pigeon, was used to pull carts, and thus was the right animal to pull Israel forward. It was the right animal to set up as a symbol of a mediator-leader.

The sin of the people was impatience. They could not wait a mere 40 days. They demanded action *now*. And, as we have seen, their hearts, following Adam and Eve, naturally demanded something visible to use as a mediator and to follow. Similarly today, those who are impatient with the bad estate of Protestantism sometimes look to one of the iconolatrous churches as the answer. Their sin is impatience.

This incident confirms for us that the purpose of graven images was to serve as mediators. The Golden Calf was not a symbol of God in Himself, nor was it a symbol of the powers that God controls. It was an image through which men could, supposedly, contact God.

The fact that Israel immediately fell into the sin of idolatry shows the power that this sin has on the human heart (Exodus 32:8, they “quickly turned aside”). We should not be surprised that the Church has had this problem throughout the ages, especially when Jesus has “delayed” to come back. Men refuse to be patient, and so set up visible images as mediators. Icons are proof and manifestation of Original Sin.

As we have seen, however, using visible objects in worship completely short-circuits all historical maturation. The people could not possibly go forward led by an image. The image would only tell them what they already knew. No challenge was possible from the image. No change could come to their culture. Thus, in order for the people to move forward to Canaan, the image had to be destroyed.

Jeroboam’s Golden Calves had the same meaning. They replaced the prophets and priests as human mediators and Yahweh as Divine Mediator. Thus, Jeroboam replaced the one and only throne of Yahweh in Jerusalem with two new throne. He replaced the priests, and he was attacked by the prophets, who rightly recognized that he was setting up a substitute for their communication of the Word of God (1 Kings 12:31-33; 13:1-3, 33).

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No. 57: The Second Word V: On Images and Art, Part 1

Posted By [James B. Jordan](#) On May 1, 1998 @ 12:00 am In [Rite Reasons Newsletter](#) | [Comments Disabled](#)

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Eugen Rosenstock-Huussy has pointed out in his essay "Hitler and Israel, or On Prayer" (available for \$2.00 from Biblical Horizons) that it is God's word "No!" that establishes in a culture the distinction between the Creator and the creature. The Bible repeatedly says "No!" to every human attempt to confuse the two. He writes, "No language that has not been revitalized by a translation of the Bible distinguishes clearly between acts of God, the properties of nature, the roles of man" (p. 180).

He provides several examples. One is mathematics. For the Greeks and for all pagans, mathematics is tied in with mysticism. Numbers are magical, powerful, and thus the truths about numbers are jealously guarded secrets. Men raise their voices to intone or proclaim (to the few) the secrets of numbers. (A York Rite Freemason once told me one of the "secrets" of Freemasonry, that they "jealously guard the Pythagorean Theorem"; though it must be admitted that in American Freemasonry such rituals are little more than games.) When Christianity arrives, however, mathematics is reduced to a matter of fact. Men no longer chant or shout when they teach the principles of arithmetic and algebra and geometry. The distinction between God, the Creator, and the numerical properties of the creation has been established. (When third-grade children chant multiplication tables, they are not intoning fundamental principles, but merely using a mnemonic device.)

Astronomy is another example. For the ancients, the stars and the constellations had magical, godlike powers. This notion is still preserved in astrology. As with numbers, men raised their voices to proclaim the mysteries of the heavens. But when Christianity comes, the stars become mere creatures. The constellations become just an aspect of the old sky-rainbow revelation set up by God for the Gentiles.

Another example is chemistry, which is a science that has been sorted out from the mystical art of alchemy.

The matter before us is the arts, especially the visual arts. We can discuss music as well, because for the ancients music was also mystical and divine. Men became enchanted through listening to and making music. Music "in-spired" men with the spirits of gods. Only when Christianity came did music become a created thing, something man has dominion over instead of something men conform and submit to.

The arts are human creations. God, of course, is the Great Artist and the Great Singer, whose Breath (Spirit) sounds out His Word into the air for men to hear. But the music and song made by men are creations, and only creations. So are the paintings and statues men make.

For the ancients, however, the visual arts were ways in which men participated mystically in the divine. In-spired by a god or spirit, a man would make a painting or a statue, and that painting or statue would then house that spirit or god or divinity in some sense.

Just as it took some time for astronomy to separate from astrology, and chemistry from alchemy, so it took time for art to separate from mysticism. Initially, the Church took very seriously the Biblical prohibition on viewing any man-made object as housing some aspect of divinity. There was no bowing to icons, statues, crosses, or the sacraments. The Church recognized that God could and did use man-made items for His own purposes, just as man uses the world God made for his own purposes. But the Church also recognized that no man-made item could capture or house God or any dimension of divinity, any "aspect of God-ness."

For the tribal man, the masks on the walls of his hut held spirits of (angelic)-animal or ancestral powers, and when he put on a mask, he was possessed by that animal or ancestor. Similarly for the city-&-temple man, such as the Egyptian or Aztec, the signs on the walls of his Temple pleased the sky-god, and thereby "captured" him so that he dwelt in the Temple.

Israel also had faces of cherubim and symbolic decorations on the walls of the Tabernacle and Temple, but these were merely symbolic. They represented the people of God gathered around Him in various capacities, and they pleased Him *only* when His people pleased Him. When the people sinned, the Temple was considered defiled, regardless of its state of physical repair. In no sense did the priests capture Yahweh; indeed, He made it plain that He Himself dwelt in the heavens and only His "name" was put in the Temple (1 Kings 8:27-30; and significantly, Psalm 138:2). Thus, for Biblical religion, the works of

man's hands represents *man* before God, not God before man.

This was also true of the animal sacrifices and the bread and wine offered to God. These items represented the people, not God. They were brought by the people to God, as covenant reminders — "memorials" — not given by God to the people as pieces of Himself. When Yahweh gave some of the flesh and bread back to the priests and people to eat, this was a gift from God, not a piece of God. It was sharing a meal *with* God, not eating a piece *of* God. The bread and wine of the Lord's Supper represent the body and blood of Jesus Christ — His glorified humanity — not His deity.

We can say the same kind of thing about music. For the tribesman, music and dancing were used to bring about the in-spiration of a god within the dancer. The masked dancer-singer became possessed by his god-spirit. In the sky-god Temple cultures, music performed a similar function, enabling Temple prostitutes to become possessed by the god so that copulating with them was copulating with the god.

In Israel, however, music was a sacrifice of praise offered by men to God. God had given His word in the Psalter, and men sang it back to Him as a way of pleasing Him. The music added to the Word was a human addition. Yes, it was vigorous and rhythmical, or quiet and reflective, but it was not done to bring about a mass enthusiasm; rather, it was done as a corporate offering to God. We can contrast true Biblical praise with the shamanistic use (abuse) of music and sound in hardcore Pentecostalism, for in such circles, music is a means of self-stimulation and mass-enthusiasm — not to mention hysteria and frenzy.

The Key Command

In the law of God, in its central form (the Ten Words), it is the Second Word that is God's great "No!" to any notion that the works of man's hands can become infused with the divine. The Second Word forbids bowing down to any object made by human hands. By implication it forbids any act of religious awe or veneration given to such an object, whether it be kissing it, or lighting candles before it, or offering it fruit, or burning incense before it. Thus, even when Yahweh gave back part of the sacrifices for men to eat, they never bowed to the pieces of meat or bread, or venerated them, or kept back some of it so they could take it home and talk to it later one. Thus, even though the Temple was Yahweh's palace, the priests were never told to bow down to it or to any part of it, for it was merely a man-made symbol. (For a full discussion of the Second Word, see *Rite Reasons* 33-36.)

God put this "No!" right at the heart of human life, at the center of the world, on the first/last day of the week, when humanity gathers before Him for worship. Set at the center of life, this powerful "No!" informs the human consciousness at its most intense and important place, worship. By making the distinction between Creator and creature plain and simple at this foundational level, God instituted a reformation of human consciousness that would spread to all other areas of life. It is only when the Second Word is clearly set forth as God's "No!" in a culture, that the arts and sciences can develop free from mysticism. Thus, it was only with the advent of Protestant Christianity that either of these really "took off." Thus, while such distinctions as those between astronomy & astrology and chemistry & alchemy are extremely important, the most important distinction is between iconic worship and aniconic (imageless) worship.

Recognizing this, and determined to blur the sovereignty and creatorhood of God, Satan moved forcefully to strike at the Second Word. He used two tactics. The first we shall discuss was the blurring of the Second Word itself. The second was the introduction of iconic worship into the Church.

The early Church followed the Jews, such as Philo and Josephus, in distinguishing the First and Second Words. Such writers as Origen, Gregory Nazianzen, Jerome, and others clearly do so. (See the article "Decalogue," in M'Clintock and Strong's *Cyclopedia of Biblical, Theological, and Ecclesiastical Literature* [1867-87, variously reprinted].) Augustine tells us, however, that at the time he wrote there were already those who wanted to combine them, while separating the Tenth Word into (9) a command against coveting the neighbor's wife and (10) another command against coveting everything else. He seems to have favored this view, and in the Western Church, until the Reformation, this erroneous view prevailed, as it still does in the Roman and Lutheran Churches.

By subordinating the content of the Second Word under the First, Satan was able to spark the notion that the only images forbidden were images of false gods. It was all right to venerate and adore images of the cross, Jesus, saints, and the bread and wine of the Lord's Supper. Naturally, this also meant that the huge amount of Biblical evidence against venerating images of the true God had to be set aside and downplayed. As a result, the clear Biblical prohibition on this practice was not clearly perceived in the Western Church.

The Early Church

Venerating the sacraments, cross, and images was unknown in the early Church. From what we can tell, the early Church continued the mindsets and traditions God had established.¹ We know that they created pictures church walls, ceilings, and floors, on tombs, and other places, but these were only pictures, illustrations.² With the coming of Constantine and the acceptance of Christianity as the approved religion of the empire, things changed. A large number of people came into the Church who were not at all

disciplined. Many were Christians in name only. Others were true believers, but very ignorant. They brought with them the mindsets and traditions of their tribes and villages, of their cities and Temples.

¹The universal hostility to images in the early Church is well summarized by Moshe Barasch, *Icon: Studies in the History of an Idea* (New York University Press, 1992). Barasch's chapter on Eusebius is of particular interest, since it makes rather clear that the early Church distinguished between mere depictions and symbols on the one hand, and any notion of a material object as a contact-point with God on the other. ²The definitive work in English on this subject is Graydon F. Snyder, *Ante Pacem: Archaeological Evidence of Church Life Before Constantine* (Macon, GA: Mercer University Press, 1985).

Before Constantine, the Christians had shown no interest in supposed "holy sites" in the "holy land." They had shown no interest in making pilgrimages there in order to pick up some kind of magical sanctity. They had shown no interest in the magical properties of relics, such as pieces of the true cross.³ They had not regarded the bread and wine of the Lord's Supper as having magical properties. They did not adore the bread and wine, nor did they bow to the cross, or venerate images in any sense. All these things gradually changed after Constantine.

³Indeed, there is no evidence that the cross even existed as a symbol in the Church before Constantine. The Bible says that Jesus was crucified on a tree, which was probably a real tree. Roman soldiers did not normally dig holes and use posts when they had real trees around. The cross Jesus carried was the cross-piece.

The Christianized Empire placed before the Church the same challenge as Solomon's Empire had. Before Solomon, the difference between believer and heathen was clearly marked, for the wicked went after other gods (as in the book of Judges). Now, however, the wicked had a reason to pay lipservice to Yahweh. They were motivated to bring a false understanding of the Temple to the Temple, viewing it as a place where Yahweh dwelled, and as an object whose presence in their midst guaranteed them success and prosperity. They were motivated to rename their Baals and Asherahs, so that they became Yahweh and His Consort. They kept their image-oriented mystical worship at high places, but said it was worship of Yahweh.

The prophets, however, insisted over and over again that this worship was in fact idolatrous. The wicked might say that their images represented Yahweh, but in fact they did not represent Him, for He could not be represented. They might say that their religious acts were done for Yahweh, but they were not accepted by Him. Regardless of what you call them, said the prophets, these objects are in fact idols.

The same conflict now began to seethe in the Christianized Roman Empire. The orthodox theologians warred against the icons and images, finally condemning them at a council in ad 754, but in 787 a wicked council overturned this decision and declared that worship through images was an essential part of the Christian religion.

(to be continued)

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No. 58: The Second Word V: On Images and Art, Part 2

Posted By [James B. Jordan](#) On July 1, 1998 @ 12:00 am In [Rite Reasons Newsletter](#) | [Comments Disabled](#)

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The Iconoclastic Controversy Continuing Pagan Influence

How did images creep in? To begin with, there was in the post-Constantinian Church a concerted effort on the part of the semi-pagans to interpret Christianity in essentially pantheistic terms. The heretics put God and man on a continuum of "being," so that God was conceived as a "thing," a "substance," and the saint was someone who merged with God-stuff better than others did. The emperor, being God's select man, the new David, had more of this God-stuff than other people by virtue of his calling and office. This mystical and pantheistic philosophical notion was at the root of most if not all the heresies that cropped up in the Church.⁴ The emperors tended to favor the heretics, because they celebrated him as semi-divine.⁵

⁴For a full and illuminating discussion, see Rousas John Rushdoony, *The Foundations of Social Order: Studies in the Creeds and Councils of the Early Church* (Philadelphia: Presbyterian & Reformed Pub. Co., 1968). ⁵*Ibid.*, *passim*. See also, on the liturgies surrounding the emperor, Sabine G. MacCormack, *Art and Ceremony in Late Antiquity* (Berkeley: University of California, 1981).

At the same time, as we have noted, the post-Constantinian Roman Empire was officially tolerant of Christianity, and then officially Christian. It is not the case that the majority of people became Christians rapidly, and we find complaints against pagan religions for centuries after Constantine, along with occasional persecutions of non-Christians. Over time, however, the pagans became officially Christians. They brought with them, however, numerous pagan ideas and practices, which the Church's leaders simultaneously tolerated and worked against.⁶

⁶For a history that may need some revision, see nevertheless Ramsay MacMullen, *Christianity and Paganism in the Fourth to Eighth Centuries* (New Haven: Yale, 1997).

Primary among these practices was the cult of the saints, of the dead. The Bible knows of no such cultus, but Christianity developed celebrations of martyrs, and those celebrations did not at all have the same character as the official liturgies of Lord's Day worship. Rather, these celebrations drew heavily upon similar pagan celebrations of the dead. It was through this "back door" that all kinds of pagan conceptions became woven into the semi-Christianity of the masses.⁷

⁷See *Ibid.*, *passim*. Also, on some of the subtle differences between Christian and pagan celebrations of the dead, see Peter Brown, *The Cult of the Saints: Its Rise and Function in Latin Christianity* (University of Chicago, 1981).

At this point I wish to summarize at length an essay by Peter Brown dealing with the background of the Iconoclastic Controversy.⁸ As I have pointed out already, the Bible absolutely forbids any veneration of man-made objects, consecrated or otherwise. The New Testament writings reveal no change in this absolute "No!" The early Church did not venerate the sacraments or church buildings or the cross (which evidently they did not use as a symbol at all).

⁸"A Dark Age Crisis: Aspects of the Iconoclastic Controversy," *English Historical Review* 88 (1973):1-34; reprinted in Brown, *Society and the Holy in Late Antiquity* (Berkeley: University of California, 1982), pp. 251-301.

Pagan Holiness

By the time of the Iconoclastic Controversy of the mid-700s, however, the Church had fallen into a serious violation of God's law. They had redefined the notion of "holy." In the Bible, holy things and holy people are holy because they are separated to and linked with (married to) God, who is holy. A saint, or "holy one," is someone given access to God's particular presence in His sanctuary. The holy things of the Old Creation all symbolized God's people in various capacities gathered around Him, and in the New Creation

that symbolism fell away as the reality came fully into being. Now it was the people themselves who, as Bride, had access to the Most Holy (as the letter to the Hebrews insists), so that the pots and pans and altars and veils that represented their presence were no longer needed.

By the 700s, however, the Church had lost this conception of holiness. They had substituted the notion that some kind of force or "blessing" from God made things and persons holy. Some kind of God-stuff, or something like God-stuff, was infused into objects, thereby rendering them "holy." This went beyond the Bible, for in the Bible the waters of baptism make people officially holy, and gives them access to the Lord's presence at His Table. But Holy Baptism is not an infusion of anything, but rather is a marriage ceremony that confirms a personal relationship between God and the believer, a relationship based in conversation (Word, prayer, psalter), not based in some kind of non-verbal mysticism.

Now, the Iconoclasts (anti-icon party) and the Iconodules (pro-icon party) disagreed over what items had this "holiness" imparted to or infused in them. Brown writes, "On the issue of what was holy and what was not the Iconoclasts were firm and unambiguous. Certain material objects were holy because they had been solemnly blessed by ordained priests. . . . For the Iconoclasts, there were only three such objects: the Eucharist, which was both given by Christ and consecrated by the clergy; the church building, which was consecrated by the bishop; [and] the sign of the cross . . . [which] was a sign given directly by God to men, when it first appeared in the sky to the Emperor Constantine" (*Society and the Holy*, p. 258). Thus, "icons could not be holy because they had received no consecration from above" (p. 259).

Now, "the Iconodules could not claim that an icon produced by an artist was holy because it had been blessed in the same solemn manner as had the Eucharistic bread or the basilica" (p. 261). "The consecration of icons is a later development" (p. 261, n. 42). Thus, the Iconodules had to formulate other theories to justify the icons. Some icons, they insisted, were given immediately by God, dropped from heaven as it were. "Other icons that did not enjoy the privileges of a direct other-worldly origin nevertheless enjoyed a consecration from the past" (p. 262). Iconodules dreamed up the idea that St. Luke had not only written a gospel, but had painted the Virgin from life, and had painted various illustrations of scenes from the life of Christ just as they had occurred.

Brown summarizes this contrast by noting that "Iconoclasm, therefore, is a centripetal reaction: It asserts the unique value of a few central symbols of the Christianity community that enjoyed consecration from above against the centrifugal tendencies of the piety that had spread the charge of the holy on to a multiplicity of unconsecrated objects" (p. 263). In other words, the semi-Christian masses wanted all kinds of charmed "holy" objects near at hand, which they could "use" apart from the liturgy, while the educated clergy were still trying to draw these semi-Christian masses toward a more Biblical, though still flawed, conception of reality.

While icons were used all over the Mediterranean by this time, they had not found their way into the church and the liturgy. "Some of the greatest shrines of the Byzantine period, most notably the Hagia Sophia itself [the great church in Constantinople], would have struck any eighth-century worshipper as almost entirely an-iconic" (p. 265).

Imperial Icons

Now Brown discusses the development of the veneration of icons as it moved toward inclusion in the Church, building on an essay by E. Kitzinger, "The Cult of Images in the Age Before Iconoclasm," *Dumbarton Oaks Papers* 8(1954):83-149. Brown writes: "A tendency to worship the individual icon had always existed among Mediterranean people. Up to the sixth century, however, the elite of the Christian Church had offered a constant resistance to 'the naive, animistic ideas of the masses' (Kitzinger, p. 146). In the late sixth century, 'the resistance to such pressure on the part of the authorities decreased . . . and this relaxation of counter pressure from above was at least a major factor in the development' (Kitzinger, p. 119). It was the imperial court rather than the bishops who were responsible for this change. For Kitzinger emphasizes that one privileged oasis of religious feeling for an image had survived intact since pagan times — the veneration of imperial images. Religious images began to receive marks of veneration analogous to the imperial images in the sixth century or even earlier; but, at the end of the sixth century, the emperors, in Kitzinger's opinion, took the final conscious step in fostering these practices. They allowed icons of Christ and of the Virgin to stand in the place of the imperial images, and so to receive the same frankly pagan worship as their own images had always received. By the seventh century, such icons were firmly established as part of the public cultus of the Byzantine Empire" (pp. 265f.)

Thus, one part of the situation that led to the worship of icons was the introduction of Christian pictures into the pagan ceremonies of the semi-Christian Emperors. Icons received a protected and official veneration at imperial shrines, though they were still disapproved for use in the Church.

The Holy Man

There was another factor, however, and here we return to the cult of the dead. Brown tells us that we need to understand how the "holy man" was viewed in popular semi-Christian piety, and with the

unfortunate blessing of the Church. "From the fourth century onwards, the holy man was a living icon. To the theologian he was man at its height, man as first made 'in the image of God.' One of the three hermits who used to visit St. Anthony came every year and sat there while the others talked, without saying a word: 'It is sufficient for me, Father,' he explained, 'just to look at you.' Merely to see a holy man could be enough for a visitor. At his death, he instantly became an icon: 'for by the archbishop's orders the plank stood upright — the body [of Daniel the Stylite, died 493] had been fixed to it so that it could not fall — and thus, like an icon, the holy man was displayed to all from every side; and for many hours the people all looked at him and also with cries and tears besought him to be an advocate with God on behalf of them all.' The holy man was a clearly-defined *locus* of the holy on earth" (p. 268).

Now comes the punch-line: "The icon merely filled a gap left by the physical absence of the holy man, whether this was due to distance or to death" (p. 269). The holy man had God-stuff infused into him. This "holiness" or charm spread to his clothing and other articles around him. After death, this charm was lodged in his body, the parts of which became relics along with his clothing and other objects associated with him. This charm was also lodged in pictures of him. As we have seen, this notion is predicated on a raw pagan, pantheistic, and mystical conception of "holiness."

Brown continues by stating that "[a]ltogether, the role of the holy man in Late Antiquity society — whether speaking, blessing, or just being seen standing in prayer — had been to translate the awesomely distant loving-kindness of God into the reassuring precision of a human face. The momentum of the search for a face made itself felt throughout the sixth century in changes in the traditional types of relics. Icons came to join the relics" (p. 272).

Now, from a Biblical viewpoint, every baptized believer is a holy person, and every living believer's face is part of the image of God revealed through the human constitution. With the pagan view of "holiness," however, only certain persons were "holy men," for only they had the charm of holiness. Thus, instead of working for righteous living in the whole community of believers, with every believer a saint, the Iconodules separated some people as charmed and "holy," and since there were only a few of them, their relics and icons became important as substitutes for their living presence.

The holy man was a pretty much wholly pagan institution. The Bible teaches that it is desirable to be married and necessary to live in community with other believers. That is what the Church is all about. The holy man, however, separated from the "world" and lived by himself in the desert, or high atop a pillar, like some kind of Buddhist monk. The holy man was, thus, a pagan and anti-ecclesiastical figure, no matter that the Church officials tried to adopt him. Holiness was otherworldliness, not obedience to God in this world (which has become Christ's world). The semi-Christianized masses looked to the holy man rather than to the Churchman for guidance. "It was to the holy man, and not to the bishop, that the early Byzantine layman instinctively turned to find out how he should behave" (p. 280). Brown writes further: "Holy men and icons were implicated on an even deeper level. For both were, technically, unconsecrated objects. Not only was the holy man not ordained as a priest or a bishop: his appeal was precisely that he stood outside the vested hierarchy of the Byzantine Church. He was holy because he was held to be holy by his clientele, not because any bishop had conferred holy orders on him. By the end of the sixth century, the exceptional position of the holy man was made explicit in formal gesture: a mystique of its own surrounded the monastic dress, the *schema*. It was the schema, and not consecration by the bishop, that conferred spiritual powers on the holy man" (pp. 280f.).

(to be continued)

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No. 59: The Second Word V: On Images and Art, Part 3

Posted By [James B. Jordan](#) On September 1, 1998 @ 12:00 am In [Rite Reasons Newsletter](#) | [Comments Disabled](#)

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The Failure of the Church

Yet a third factor played an important role in this historical development, in addition to the imperial adoption of icons and the rise of the icons of the holy man. Brown writes: "The great Christian basilicas of the previous centuries tended to stand empty, except for great occasions. In these, the solemn liturgy of the Eucharist was celebrated. But this liturgy had become awesome and distant. In it, Christ was withdrawn from the masses in a deliberate attempt to surround the Eucharist with the trappings of an imperial ceremonial. Personal piety, therefore, leaked away towards the icons. For the icons were the way to the intercessions of the saints who formed the back-stairs government of the awesome throne" (p. 283).

In other words, the flourishing of this pagan piety was mainly the fault of the Church herself. The local Church had ceased long ago to be a gathered community, sitting around a table with Jesus. People hungry for contact with God, or "God," were virtually driven to look elsewhere.

Icons and Cities

A final aspect of the drift into idolatry is discussed by Brown. The Mediterranean city had always celebrated its founder, who was viewed as being divinized at death and becoming a god. This founder-god was the official protector of the city. When a city became Christian, the old founder was replaced by a new founder. The founder of the new Christian city was usually the evangelist who first brought the gospel to the city, and who often had been killed for his pains. This martyr-founder, now in heaven, became the official protector of the city. His image was put on the city walls and/or high on the walls of the church, facing outward against the city's foes.

The Crisis

"The Arab raids of the late seventh century fell like a hammer-blow on the rich and loosely-knit world that we have described. They created a deep demoralization. Only one city, Nicaea, felt that it could convincingly ascribe its deliverance to its local icons. . . . Byzantines had faced enough crises to know what to do. They knew that God was frequently angry with them for their sins. . . . What the Iconoclasts were intent on removing and punishing was not particular sins but something more serious: the root sin of the human race, the deep stain of the error of idolatry" (pp. 284-285).

The position of the Iconoclasts was hard to refute. It was clear that the icons had failed to protect the cities they were supposed to guard. It was also clear that the Empire was being judged. It was further clear that this judgment came after a century and a half of proliferating images, images the Bible clearly condemned.

Politically, the situation in the Empire had changed. No longer was it possible for Byzantium to function as a loose association of cities with an Emperor at the top, for the cities were falling. The Emperors moved to centralize power, and part of centralizing power was to favor the Church against the monks, against the "holy men." This meant favoring the Iconoclasts and making the basilica, the cross, and the Eucharist the only "holy" objects.

Meanwhile, faced with justifying their practices, the Iconoclasts formulated arguments to buttress the use of veneration of icons. Grotesque misinterpretations of a few selected Bible texts, along with a greatly inflated argument that icons had always been used in Christendom, coupled with a complete adoption of Greek philosophical notions about truth and education, formed the bulwark of their arguments.⁹ The

Iconodules demanded something relatively new. If the Empire was going to center its religious activities in the Church, the icons should be placed in the churches. Refugees had brought local icons from their defeated towns and cities, and they wanted these put up in the churches.

⁹For a completely sympathetic presentation of the Iconodule position, see Ambrosios Giakalis, *Images of the Divine: The Theology of Icons at the Seventh Ecumenical Council* (Leiden: Brill, 1994).

Although there was conflict and persecution back and forth for the next couple of centuries, eventually the Iconodules won the battle. The Church became the center of Byzantine Christendom, but the icons were included in the churches.

The Western Christian churches did not go through the Iconoclastic Controversy, and initially were reluctant to bring images into the Church. Eventually, however, the Roman Catholic Church became almost as enamored of the veneration of man-made objects as the Eastern Church had become, though in the West, statuary tended to predominate over painting.

Renaissance and Reformation

The tares grow alongside the wheat, and about the time that the Church truly rediscovered the Biblical revelation, Satan raised up a counterfeit that rediscovered the ancient pagan writings of Plato, Aristotle, and the supposed Egyptian writings of Hermes Trismegistus. After a millennium of Christianity, however, the neo-pagans of the Renaissance could not go back to putting themselves under the spell of art, music, number, and matter (chemistry), though they could still revive astrology. They were, however, able to coopt these things to a great extent.

The reason is that the Reformation, necessarily perhaps, threw the baby out with the bathwater. Not only did they say that the arts and sciences were merely human devices, and in no sense divine, but they also removed them from the worship of the Church. They knew that a highly symbolic and decorous architecture characterized the central worship sites of God in the Old Creation (tabernacle and Temple), and that a powerful music with choir and orchestra was used in the Temple, but they rejected these as unfit for the more "spiritual" (read: intellectualized) worship of the New Creation. Very strange exegetical manouvers were needed for this, but the Reformers and their followers proved up to the task, sadly.

The result was that that arts ceased to be tied to worship as the place where this human gift was offered to God. Visual art moved almost exclusively to museums and the homes of the wealthy. Art music moved almost exclusively to the concert hall.

This was a necessary stage in the development of Christian and human consciousness, but it is a stage that must now be brought to an end. We now see that cutting the tie between the Church and the arts has led to their being taken over the neo-pagans. And increasingly we see music reverting to a kind of paganism in which people go to rock concerts or hyper-Pentecostal churches and are absorbed and rendered helplessly enthused by the sheer volume of sound. Once again people are "coming under the spell" of music, instead of taking it in hand and offering it to God as praise.

Image and Tradition

Tradition is a very trick item. Most people have the idea that their traditions go back for centuries, but very often what is thought of as an ancient tradition is only a few decades old. The generation that grows up under the spell of a new idea tends to think that that idea is older than it is, and the next generation takes it for ancient tradition. We see this in the Bible itself. The Pharisees of Jesus' day believed in a supposed Oral Law tradition handed down from Moses. This tradition did not exist at the time the last writings of the so-called Old Testament were issued, nor did it exist at the time of the Maccabees. It was only a few generations old in Jesus' day, and Jesus repeatedly attacked it as a demonic invasion of the community of truth. But the Pharisees were convinced that it was ancient, and eventually wrote it down in the Mishnah, wrote commentaries on it in the Talmuds, and to this day the Oral Law tradition continues to define Rabbinic Judaism.

Similarly, the iconodules came to believe that the service of icons in the Church had been present from the beginning, although there is no evidence of any such a practice before the 700s. This myth is perpetuated in the Roman and especially the Eastern Churches. In these semi-Christian groups it is regarded as a fact that God instituted the service of icons, though how such a service is to be understood is open for debate. Modern Orthodox theologians, for instance, are far too sophisticated to believe that icons contain any kind of "stuff," whether God-stuff or the stuff of the person pictured in the icon. Rather,

they maintain that the icon is a kind of telephone to the person of the saint (or God) at the other end. The icon is a window into heaven, and thus to stare at the icon is to gaze at the saint, and to speak to the icon is to chat with the saint; to kiss the icon is to kiss the saint, and to bow to the icon is to honor the saint. Yet, in spite of these "advances" in conception, the notion of a transmission of some kind of power is not absent from the modern advocates of icon veneration. The icon is not merely a pictorial representation, a symbol of a person or event, but actually makes a connection and transmits power.¹⁰

¹⁰For a discussion, see Leonid Ouspensky and Vladimir Lossky, *The Meaning of Icons*, trans. G. E. H. Palmer and E. Kadloubovsky (Crestwood, NY: St. Vladimir's Seminary Press, 1983).

There is no need to repeat here the arguments against such a notion, for we have done so in our essays on the Second Word (*Rite Reasons* 33-36). The Bible strictly forbids such veneration on pain of horrible curses, and so the Christian mind seeks to understand why the Bible makes this prohibition, and does not seek to justify disobedience. For the Orthodox, the image is a visual communication of truth just as the Bible is a verbal communication of truth, but Biblical religion teaches that God never intended the eye as the organ whereby divine truth is received. Truth is verbal, never visual, for while God is Word, God is not visible.

Image and Theology

Orthodoxy and Roman Catholicism, and their imitators in Anglo-Catholicism, can never attain to a fully Christian understanding of reality as long as they maintain the veneration of man-made objects. These groups refuse to hear God's "No!" As a result, there is always some point in their philosophies where God and the creation merge in an ultimate pantheism. It is to the credit of the better theologians in these circles that they resist this tendency, but until they burn their images, they will never completely avoid it.

Biblical religion clearly distinguishes between art and icon. Art is symbolic representation. It is something that man makes and that may and should be offered to God as a gift, as a service. It is not something that comes from God to man. Visual art can be sermonic, but it can never be on the level of the Word of God. Just as we do not treat the preacher's sermon as the same as God's own words, so we must not treat religious art as some kind of silent communication from God.

And this brings us back to our beginning. Christianity sorts out chemistry from alchemy, astronomy from astrology, and science from magic. Important as these advances have been, they are not the heart of the matter. At the center of human life is worship, and it is at the point of worship that the essential distinction must be made. Liturgical observance of the Second Word is the foundation of all other advances in knowledge and dominion.

There is another aspect of the matter that must also claim our reflections. Art is glory. It is man's labor to continue God's original work of bringing light, form, and filling to the world. The Spirit who entered the world to work on the first day of creation, entered the dust to make man as His agent on the sixth day. Man is the agent of cosmic glorification. Now, since God is glorious, man's work of glorification is a work of revealing God's glory in the cosmos and history. (See my paper, *Christian Piety: Deformed and Reformed*, available for \$2.00 from Biblical Horizons .)

Glory is not, however, the place where God meets man; and this is what the Orthodox semi-Christians forget or do not admit. Glory is an outflow of God's relationship with man — apart from God, men tend to uglify rather than glorify the cosmos. God meets man in language, in personal discourse. Music may glorify that conversation — and it should do so in worship — but God does not meet man in music. Nor does He meet man in visual art of any sort. He meets man in the Word of God, in language; and because God is incorporeal, He meets man in language alone.

Another way to put this is that God meets man only through the Son of God, the Word. The Spirit is the glory, the music, the visual display, of God; but God does not meet man through the Spirit. By insisting that icons are a separate channel of non-verbal communication with God and the saints, the Orthodox separate the Spirit from the Son. Understandably, they deny that the Spirit proceeds from the Son. Biblical religion, however, insists that the work of the Spirit is to enable us to understand the Word of the Son, not to be a separate way of approaching God. God's "No!" is a rejection of any attempt on the part of man to approach God apart from His Son.

The Son has promised to meet us in two places: in our sin and in our weakness. He will rejoice in our glory, but only if we have first encountered Him in our humility. As sinners, we must meet Him in our sin, and as

creatures, as newborn babies, as little children, we must meet Him in our weakness. Good works, maturity, and glory must be the outflow of that encounter, not the basis of it.

Worship is the heart of life, the repeated new-beginning point set at the center of the world on the first day of the week. Thus, worship is the place where we come back to being sinners and come back to being infants. True, we are more than that, and it is very appropriate to offer to God the best of the firstfruits of our hands in worship. It is appropriate that worship have an element of glory, therefore. But we must never confuse that element of glory with the foundation of worship, which is the simplicity of confession of our sin and our re-adoption as children. The first part of the covenant renewal, the Entrance, consisting of call, confession, and absolution, should not be glorified. This is the time for kneeling and speaking, not for standing and singing. When people are attracted to the Church because of her glory, whether that glory be great rhetorical preaching or a wonderful interior design, they are attracted for the wrong reasons and by the wrong aspect of the Church. And when that happens, the Church must sometimes set aside her glory in order to make clear her purpose and mission.

In summary, the heresy of icon veneration destroys Biblical religion along the following lines:

1. It confuses eye and ear. The eye is the organ of dominion, seeing the visible cosmos, not the invisible God. The ear is the organ of submission, hearing the Word of God. The eye can only reveal *things*, while the ear reveals *persons*. Looking at a person only reveals his or her "thingness"; it is only in listening to a person that we discern his or her personhood. Icon veneration, thus, reduces persons to things.
2. It separates the Son and the Spirit, viewing glory as an avenue to God apart from the Word.
3. It positions the glory-work of human beings at the foundation of human life, implicitly displacing God's Word as the foundation of the life of sinners and helpless infants. It makes the eschatological glory of the Bride equal to the protological humility of the Son as the foundation of the Kingdom, and by so doing eternalizes time and destroys history. Pagan contemplation replaces Biblical obedience.
4. And, apart from all theological considerations, it openly violates the Second of the Ten Words, thereby bringing down the curse of God to the third and fourth generations of those who thereby "hate" Him.

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