

Are Icons



IDOLS?

# No! Icons are Part Of Christian Old Testament Heritage

“Thou shalt not make unto thee any graven image, or any likeness of any thing that is in heaven above, or that is in the earth beneath, or that is in the water under the earth: thou shalt not bow down thyself to them, nor serve them, for I the Lord thy God am a jealous God, visiting the iniquity of the fathers upon the children unto the third and fourth generation of them that hate me.” (Ex 20:4-5)

As far as most Protestants are concerned: case closed! After all, these sound to be pretty stiff words, no ifs, ands or buts about it. But are they? If Moses was so aggravated about “images” (icons) then why do we find icons all over the Old Testament? Indeed, why did Moses commission the creation of icons? Consider what we read just a few chapters after this:

“And the Lord spake unto Moses...thou shalt make two cherubim of gold, of beaten work shalt thou make them...” (Ex 25:1,18). Nor did God stop there: He ordered Moses to make a veil for the Tabernacle which was to be embroidered with images on it: “And thou shalt make a veil of blue and purple and scarlet and fine twined linen...with cherubim it shall be made.” (Ex 26:31).

Although we do not know exactly what these cherubim looked like, we know that they were angels who had six wings and leontine bodies, somewhat like the sphinxes of ancient Egypt. It really doesn't matter what they looked like – the point is that they prove that in both the ancient Tabernacle and then Solomon's Temple, iconography of a sort was very evident.

Indeed, there were even statues in Solomon's Temple and they were of a massive scale: “And within the oracle [Solomon] made two cherubim of olive wood, each ten cubits high [approx. 18 ft high!]” (1 Kings 6:23).

Even the walls of the Temple had icons: “And he carved all the walls of the House round about with carved figures of cherubim and palm trees and open flowers, within and without (6:29)... and on the borders that were between the ledges were lions, oxen and cherubim..”(7:29).

To assume from the Old Testament that imagery was forbidden is false. What was forbidden were idols, that is to say, objects of worship. Indeed, the Jews used contemptuous language to refer to idols; words such as: *'elilim* (powerless ones), *gillulim* (pellets of dung) or *shiqqutsim* (shameful things) to refer to idols. One must remember that many ancient peoples (Greeks included) often treated the idol as a god itself: they bathed it, clothed it and even offered food to it! This of course is folly of the worst sort and the Jews, to their credit, called it such.

The Christian Church, likewise inherited the same mindset as their Jewish forebears, clearly discerning the difference between an image of decoration and an object of worship. From the earliest of times, from the very catacombs themselves, Christians painted frescoes on the walls of their places of worship, both to beautify their sanctuaries and to edify the believers. As such, icons

are both useful and beautiful but what makes them venerable is not the wood, canvas or paint nor the artist who painted them, but Christ or the saint who is portrayed on them. It is to him (or her) to whom we direct our attention and prayers, not to the image. To do otherwise would in fact be idolatry.

The Church dealt with the issue of imagery vs. idolatry very comprehensively during the times of the so-called iconoclastic controversy. Some of the Church Fathers wrote extensively on the use of images in the Church and we also have many canons which give us guidelines regarding the painting and use of icons within our faith. If you want to learn more, contact any Orthodox Christian parish in Oklahoma.

