

The Early Church Fathers on Sacred Images

The Bible forbids the making and worshiping of images: "You shall not have other Gods besides me. You shall not carve idols for yourselves in the shape of anything in the sky above or on the earth below or in the waters beneath the earth. You shall not bow down before them or worship them" (Exodus 20:3-5). But most Protestants take this to mean that the mere making of images is forbidden. This is indeed unfortunate as it ignores not only Church history but Scripture itself. The same God who makes the prohibition in Exodus 20 requires that images be made for the Ark of the Covenant (Exodus 37:7), the tabernacle (Exodus 36:8) and Solomon's temple (1 Kings 6:23, 7:25, and 7:29). Ironically, even the most ardent critics violate this supposed directive. And they do that by having photographs of family and friends and perhaps even paintings of famous people. After all, if we are not to make images then we are not to make images. And photographs and paintings are images.

Tertullian

The brazen serpent and the golden cherubim were not violations of the Second Commandment. Their meaning. Likewise, when forbidding the similitude to be made of all things which are in heaven, and in earth, and in the waters, He declared also the reasons, as being prohibitory of all material exhibition of a latent idolatry. For He adds: "Thou shalt not bow down to them, nor serve them." The form, however, of the brazen serpent which the Lord afterwards commanded Moses to make, afforded no pretext for idolatry, but was meant for the cure of those who were plagued with the fiery serpents? I say nothing of what was figured by this cure. Thus, too, the golden Cherubim and Seraphim were purely an ornament in the figured fashion of the ark; adapted to ornamentation for reasons totally remote from all condition of idolatry, on account of which the making a likeness is prohibited; and they are evidently not at variance with this law of prohibition, because they are not found in that form of similitude, in reference to which the prohibition is given (*Against Marcion* 2:22 [inter A.D. 207-212]).

Eusebius

They say that this statue is an image of Jesus. It has remained to our day, so that we ourselves also saw it when we were staying in the city. Nor is it strange that those of the Gentiles who, of old, were benefited by our Savior, should have done such things, since we have learned also that the likenesses of his apostles Paul and Peter, and of Christ himself, are preserved in paintings, the ancients being accustomed, as it is likely, according to a habit of the Gentiles, to pay this kind of honor indiscriminately to those regarded by them as deliverers (*Church History* 7 [A.D. 325]).

Basil

I acknowledge also the holy apostles, prophets, and martyrs; and I invoke them to supplication to God, that through them, that is, through their mediation, the merciful God may be propitious to me, and that a ransom may be made and given me for my sins. Wherefore also I honor and kiss the features of their images, inasmuch as they have been handed down from the holy apostles, and are not forbidden, but are in all our churches (Letter 360 [circa A.D. 370]).

John Chrysostom

For like a conflagration indeed, or like a thunderbolt hurled from on high, have they lighted upon the roof of the Church, and yet they rouse up no one; but whilst our Father's house is burning, we are sleeping, as it were, a deep and stupid sleep. And yet who is there whom this fire does not touch? Which of the statues that stand in the Church? for the Church is nothing else than a house built of the souls of us men. Now this house is not of equal honor throughout, but of the stones which contribute to it, some are bright and shining, whilst others are smaller and more dull than they, and yet superior again to others. There we may see many who are in the place of gold also, the gold which adorns the ceiling. Others again we may see, who give the beauty and gracefulness produced by statues. Many we may see, standing like pillars. For he is accustomed to call men also on account of their beauty, adding as they do, much grace, and having their heads overlaid with gold (*Homilies* 10 on Ephesians [circa A.D. 400]).

Cyril of Alexandria

Even if we make images of pious men it is not so that we might adore them as gods but that when we see them we might be prompted to imitate them; and if we make images of Christ, it is so that our minds might wing aloft in yearning for Him (*Commentary on the Psalms* 113B 115:16 [**ante A.D. 429**]).

Council of Ephesus

Theodosius, the humble Christian, to the holy and Ecumenical Synod: I confess and I agree to (suntiqemai) and I receive and I salute and I venerate in the first place the spotless image of our Lord Jesus Christ, our true God, and the holy image of her who bore him without seed, the holy Mother of God, and her help and protection and intercessions each day and night as a sinner to my aid I call for, since she has confidence with Christ our God, as he was born of her. Likewise, also I receive and venerate the images of the holy and most laudable Apostles, prophets, and martyrs and the fathers and cultivators of the desert. Not indeed as gods (God forbid!) do I ask all these with my whole heart to pray for me to God, that he may grant me through their intercessions to find mercy at his hands at the day of judgment, for in this I am but showing forth more clearly the affection and love of my soul which I have borne them from the first. Likewise, also I venerate and honor and salute the relics of the Saints as of those who fought for Christ and who have received grace from him for the healing of diseases and the curing of sicknesses and the casting out of devils, as the Christian Church has received from the holy Apostles and Fathers even down to us to-day (Session 1, [**A.D. 431**]).

Gregory the Great

Furthermore, we notify to you that it has come to our ears that your Fraternity, seeing certain adorers of images, broke and threw down these same images in Churches. And we commend you indeed for your zeal against anything made with hands being an object of adoration; but we signify to you that you ought not to have broken these images. For pictorial representation is made use of in Churches for this reason; that such as are ignorant of letters may at least read by looking at the walls what they cannot read in books. Your Fraternity therefore should have both preserved the images and prohibited the people from adoration of them, to the end that both those who are ignorant of letters might have wherewith to gather a knowledge of the history, and that the people might by no means sin by adoration of a pictorial representation. (Letters 9:105 [**A.D. 600**]).

Quinisext Council

In some pictures of the venerable icons, a lamb is painted to which the Precursor points his finger, which is received as a type of grace, indicating beforehand through the Law, our true Lamb, Christ our God (Canon 82 [**A.D. 692**]).

2nd Council of Nicaea

We, therefore, following the royal pathway and the divinely inspired authority of our Holy Fathers and the traditions of the Catholic Church (for, as we all know the Holy Spirit indwells her), define with all certitude and accuracy that just as the figure of the precious and life-giving Cross, so also the venerable and holy images, as well in painting and mosaic as of other fit materials, should be set forth in the holy churches of God, and on the sacred vessels and on the vestments and on hangings and in pictures both in houses and by the wayside, to wit, the figure of our Lord God and Savior Jesus Christ, of our spotless Lady, the Mother of God, of the honorable Angels, of all Saints and of all pious people. For by so much more frequently as they are seen in artistic representation, by so much more readily are men lifted up to the memory of their prototypes, and to a longing after them; and to these should be given due salutation and honorable reverence not indeed that true worship of faith which pertains alone to the divine nature; but to these, as to the figure of the precious and life-giving Cross and to the Book of the Gospels and to the other holy objects, incense and lights may be offered according to ancient pious custom. For the honor which is paid to the image passes on to that which the image represents, and he who reveres the image reveres in it the subject represented (Session 7, [**A.D. 787-788**]).