

# On the use of images in devotion

*by Paul Coulter, originally written March 2008; revised May 2012*

## The issue

This article arose out a request from church leaders for some guidance as to the appropriateness of using visual representations of Jesus as backgrounds to songs being sung during corporate worship. This issue faces the contemporary church for several reasons:

- Firstly, the now widespread availability of projection software and data projectors has made it much easier for images to be introduced without requiring any permanent alteration to buildings. Undoubtedly most churches would spend some considerable time deciding on the appropriateness of introducing a fixed image on the wall (or on a stained glass window) if they had not previously had such images. It is much easier for an image to be projected for a few minutes during a time of praise without having to pass through committees for approval.
- Secondly, the increasing degree of specialisation in Christian ministry and the separation of different aspects of corporate worship in many churches has introduced 'grey areas' in which it is unclear who makes decisions and on what basis. This sets the church up for conflict between the 'worship leader(s)', by which contemporary Evangelicals generally (but wrongly in my estimation) mean the people who lead the church in sung praise, and the teacher(s) or elders of the church. The former are often younger and more artistically inclined than the latter. Stereotypically, former may see themselves as the progressive force for relevance, the latter as the preservers of theological wisdom or traditional forms. It is essential that this issue does not become the basis for unnecessary conflict. It is also essential that the resolution of the potential conflict is handled constructively.
- Thirdly, there is a trend within contemporary Christianity towards a greater appreciation of all things artistic, a greater desire to engage in 'multi-sensory worship' and an interest in tapping into a breadth of Christian traditions. The 'emerging church' movement, in all its diversity, has been at the fore of this drive, but it also reflects currents of postmodernism in the wider culture. Although some of this trend can be welcomed, the question is whether churches will simply decide on the basis of pragmatism ('That might attract more of this kind of person') or experimentalism ('We might as well give that a go'), both of which have plagued Evangelicalism since at least the 1950s, or whether a more solid biblical and theological basis can be found for reaching a decision.

My approach to this issue will be firstly to examine relevant Scriptures. This must be the first consideration as Scripture alone is God's authoritative revelation and useful for correcting and teaching us in both beliefs and behaviour (2 Timothy 3:16-17). Having considered Scripture I will then briefly discuss the light that church history can shed on the issue before proposing a framework for thinking through the issue based on our general use of images of people. My intention is to help church leaders and others think through this issue and be fully convinced in their own minds (Romans 14:5).

## Relevant Scriptures

### Old Testament

- *Exodus 20:4-6* – the second commandment forbids the making of an image of any created thing to become an object of worship or to be bowed down to. The central reason given by the Lord is that He is a jealous God. He will not share the devotion of His people with anything or anyone else.

- *Isaiah 40:9ff* – the prophet speaks of the absurdity of trying to capture the reality of God’s person in an image. He points to creation as evidence of God’s greatness and paints a verbal picture of the sovereign God but clearly distinguishes this use of language and of creation from attempting to make an image of God Himself.

Although the Old Testament clearly forbids the creation of images of God or the use of images of created things in worship, it does not discourage other art forms. In fact, the Temple included many images of nature and even the Ark of the Covenant had metal images of cherubim on it. The prohibitions are specifically against images purporting to represent God. The concern is apparently twofold:

- a) No man-made image could ever capture the likeness of the invisible God in His glory.
- b) Man-made images may begin as aids to help think about God, but this easily (and perhaps inevitably) descends into the object or image becoming a substitute for God. What begins as prayer to the God the image is intended to reflect ends up as prayer to the image in God’s place.

## New Testament

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

The New Testament is consistent with the Old Testament in its insistence that God is invisible and that He cannot and should not be represented in visual images. The great difference between the two Testaments, however, is the fact that Jesus was visible. In the incarnation, God took on human form and was seen – He had a face. Despite this fact, however, the New Testament nowhere attempts to give us any physical description of Christ. In fact, the only reference to His appearance in Scripture is in Isaiah 53:2, where the point is that there was nothing special about how he looked. Furthermore, the writers of the gospels did not include lengthy descriptions of the physical suffering of Christ. It is only in Revelation 1:12-16 that we read a physical description of Christ, but there the detail is of His glory, not his features. It seems that the incarnate Christ was an ordinary looking man who would not have stood out from his contemporaries. Furthermore, the lack of any physical descriptions of Jesus highlight a significant difference between our image-obsessed culture and the culture of Jesus' day.

## Lessons from Church History

### The early Church

The earliest Christians did not use images of Christ, rather their art focused on symbolic images (e.g. the art of the catacombs in Rome which shows the 'Good Shepherd' carrying a lamb on his shoulders), and the earliest references to images of Christ are of images used by pagans and Gnostic heretics. The early church father Irenaeus (d. c.200) spoke critically of such images in his *Against Heresies*:<sup>1</sup>

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

Irenaeus's view appears to have been typical of Christian leaders and writers in the first centuries after Christ.

### The introduction of the use of images (icons)

Central to the debate about the use of icons is the doctrine of the incarnation and the identification of God with the material world in the body of Christ. John of Damascus (c.676-749) exemplifies the argument that was advanced to defend the practice of using icons in prayer. He insisted that to prohibit the use of icons was tantamount to denying the incarnation, the presence of the Word of God in the material world. For John, and for many within the Orthodox and Roman Catholic traditions, icons are a tangible reminder of the physicality of God as revealed in Jesus Christ. It is claimed that the Old Testament prohibition on images of the divine was superseded by God Himself when He revealed Himself in human form. There are, however, three major flaws with this argument. Firstly, the Scriptures describe the revelation of God in Christ in terms of His character, words and actions, rather than His physical appearance and substance. Secondly, we simply do not have an authentic representation of the likeness of Christ and hence any purported likeness of him is only the product of human imagination and therefore prone to distortion (the strikingly European appearance of so many 'pictures of Jesus' is testimony to this fact). Thirdly, Christ gave us other ways to remember him in His absence and the Scriptures emphasise the blessing of knowing, loving and believing in Jesus without seeing Him but also the future hope of seeing Him in person. The use of images can distract from the means of remembrance Christ instituted and can descend into idolatry as the image becomes the object of worship rather than Christ Himself.

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<sup>1</sup> Available: <http://www.newadvent.org/fathers/0103125.htm> (accessed 08 May 2012)

It seems clear that the arguments for the use of icons do not find their basis in Scripture but in popular folk religion, where there is a constant desire for something more tangible, more readily defined and more easily controlled. In its fullest form this becomes magic, and medieval Catholicism did descend into a magical conception of the sacraments of the Church. The same arguments that are used for icons (religious images) are also used to justify the Roman Catholic doctrines of transubstantiation and of relics, but contemporary Christians who are attracted to the use of images seldom wish to justify these ideas. It is true that the incarnate Christ was the true and perfect image of God, but the Scriptures that explain this never make reference to His physical appearance but to His character and power (see above).

## Reactive iconoclasm

Whatever its origins and initial 'theological justifications', the use of images in both Eastern and Western churches certainly unhealthy devotion to the image that distracted from devotion to the living Christ. This provoked a period of reactive iconoclasm (destruction of icons) in both the Byzantine church (temporarily in the 8<sup>th</sup> century before a permanent return to the use of icons) and the Western church (during the Protestant Reformation of the 16<sup>th</sup> and 17<sup>th</sup> centuries). Significantly, the same tendency is seen in the history of Israel, where the bronze snake made by Moses under God's orders (Numbers 21) became an object of idolatry later in the history of Israel, so that in the iconoclastic time of Hezekiah it had to be destroyed (2 Kings 18:4). We would do well to heed the lessons of history both in the church and Israel and not to somehow think that our generation will avoid this temptation where others did not.

## Reformers and Puritans

Martin Luther (1483-1546) did, apparently, object to the use of images in devotion. He has been quoted as saying:<sup>2</sup>

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

Most of the Protestant Reformers, however, including Calvin and Zwingli, were opposed to the use of images in devotion and their display in church buildings.<sup>3</sup> Although Luther's contribution is helpful in terms of a healthy appreciation of the arts and it may be argued that some other Reformers, and especially the Puritans in 17<sup>th</sup> Century England and America, went too far in denying any appropriate use of art in churches, Luther's argument for the use of images in devotion is not convincing. There is a fundamental difference between an image in our hearts, which is fluid and dynamic, and an image before our eyes, which is limited and static.

<sup>2</sup> Quoted on <http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Iconoclasm> (accessed 08 May 2012)

<sup>3</sup> Chapter XI of Calvin's *Institutes* is devoted to the question of the use of images in church buildings

## Summary

The use of images in devotion clearly led to the problem of idolatry. The record of history suggests that images of the saints were used at an earlier stage than images of Christ, a fact which contributed to devotion to the saints in Roman Catholic practice. Some Reformers may have swung too far in reaction to this problem by banning any use of the visual arts in churches, but they were undoubtedly correct in identifying that use of images had replaced the living Christ with devotion to a created object. Thus the lesson of Church history is that images initially intended for positive purposes subtly become a distraction from the reality they were intended to point to. It would appear to me to be rash and proud to claim that we in our generation can cope with this danger in a way that past generations clearly could not.

## Why do we use images?

Images of people tend to be used for five purposes:

1. As a keep-sake or reminder of the person in their absence (as in a photo of my wife in my wallet or on my desk)
2. As a record of a special occasion or to include us vicariously in an occasion at which we were not present (as in photos of family Christmases, copies of which may be sent to absent family members to share the memory with them)
3. For educational purposes
4. For advertising or promotional purposes
5. In totalitarian regimes as a tool of control or propaganda, to remind the people of the constant presence of a 'great leader' who may be dead or alive.

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

### Reminder

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

### Record

The simple fact is that we do not have a visual record of the events of Christ's life and it is through verbal accounts that God chose to bring us into the events but these accounts are devoid of any details about physical appearance, focusing instead on the character, words and actions of Christ. The distinction between visual images and written accounts is significant. Using images to 'capture' the events does just that – it captures them and defines them rigidly, inhibiting further learning or shaping. Written records spark the imagination, whereas images tend to stunt it. Think, by way of illustration, of the difference between reading a book (e.g. *The Lion the Witch and the Wardrobe* or *The Lord of the Rings*) and watching the movie adaptation. Although the movie may be good, exhilarating and thought provoking, it does not move the imagination (dare I say it does not move the mind or heart) in the same way that the book does. Furthermore, experiential knowledge of Christ's living presence is available to all believers individually, not mediated through a priest or artist (this is central to the New Covenant – see Hebrews 8:11). He is present with us through the Holy Spirit, the promised Counsellor like Him (John 14:16-17). Perhaps there is a danger in this age that artists become the new priesthood, distancing those who do not create art but simply respond to the art of others from their personal experience of God.

## **Education**

This seems to me an appropriate way to use images of events in the life of Christ, where the image or film can give us insights into the historical or cultural context that we may not get so readily through words alone. In these contexts, however, it is possible to critique the image, revealing its limitations as well as discussing its implications. Although I respect the fact that some believers may be uncomfortable with the idea of a living human being depicting Christ, if this is done well and sensitively I believe it can be an aid to understanding the events of Jesus' life. This is, however, quite distinct from a time of 'devotion' whenever critical faculties may be less engaged and emotions may be higher. Perhaps those who make films of Jesus' life should bear this in mind and avoid lingering shots of the actor playing Jesus.

## **Promotion**

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

## **Propaganda**

This is clearly not an appropriate or helpful way to use an image of Christ. He is Lord of the church and of His followers in a way that no merely human dictator can be, not through fear and conquest but through love and the willing surrender of our lives to Him. His lordship is direct in our lives as the Spirit fills and leads us, and His authority is expressed in the church through His under-shepherds – the overseers. One day He, the Chief Shepherd will appear (1 Peter 5:4), and then His presence will be our lamp (Revelation 21:23), but until then it is the written word of God that lights our path as the Spirit illuminates it and empowers it in our lives. To depend on an image of Christ is to neglect the presence of the Spirit who is the Counsellor like Christ. Christ anticipated the time when He would no longer be present in person with His followers, but explained that the Spirit would continue His work and that He would return one day in person (John 14). We must accept that this is God's intended way for us to relate to Him.

## **Conclusions**

Images can have a powerful impact on the viewer. The tendency at times in church history to reject all visual arts does not fit with the Biblical understanding that art is a gift from God and that artistic representations of nature can help to inspire worship as they did in the Jerusalem Temple. No one has ever seen God, who is spirit and invisible, but His character has been revealed in the person of Jesus Christ. We have no record of the physical appearance of Christ in Scripture and there is every reason to believe that this 'omission' is intentional as the physical appearance of Jesus is not important to our faith. Our current culture has an increasing appreciation for artistic expression in the form of pictures, video and music. Churches should recognise this and utilise the best of each of these art forms to educate people and to stimulate us to worship the One who created everything and who is the giver of all good gifts. We

must, however, also recognise the importance of silence and absence of visual stimulation and, even if our culture does not appreciate such simplicity, we must learn to appreciate it. To make an image of the invisible God is both futile and fraught with dangers. It is a violation of the second commandment, especially if there is any intention of using it in devotion. The human mind is such that we are unable to detach such images from our conception of the One they purport to represent.

Regarding the use of 'images of Christ' in worship, although it may not constitute a breach of the second commandment, it still carries the danger of descending into idolatry as the mind and heart of the worshipper become fixed on the image. Images and film depictions of Christ can arguably have a valuable place in education, in illustrating teaching and in evangelism but their use in devotion raises deep concerns. Christ was fully human, and those who knew Him during His time on earth knew what He looked like, but the New Testament gives us no warrant for using images of Christ to aid devotion and, in fact, He promised that those who believe in Him without seeing Him are blessed. To use images of Christ as a devotional aid during communion or at other times is likely to be harmful. No attempt at an image of Christ can possibly be completely accurate. It will either be a photograph of an actor or the product of an artist's imagination, either based on careful research into what Jesus may have looked like or more fanciful notions. In any case, it is NOT a picture of Christ. To use it in devotion is, therefore, to substitute the real Christ with a created thing or person. This distracts from the impact of what we can know about Christ from Scripture and may potentially lead us into idolatry. The human heart is easily led astray, and we must be careful to avoid anything that may take the place of Christ, even if it is an attempted representation of Him. One day we will see Christ face to face and until then we should be content to meditate on His words and remember Him in the visual and tactile new covenant feast of the Lord's Supper that He instituted.