
Iconoclasm, Incarnation, and Eschatology: Toward a Catholic Understanding of the Reformed Doctrine of the ‘Second’ Commandment

DAVID VANDRUNEN*

Abstract: Reformed Christianity has traditionally understood the second commandment (‘Thou shalt not make for thyself any graven image . . .’) as prohibiting the manufacture or use of images of Jesus Christ. The arguments in support of this position have often been inadequate and have paid insufficient attention to the Catholic doctrine of the incarnation. This article argues that the traditional Reformed prohibition of images is sound, but that a revised defense of this view is needed. I conclude that the specificity of the visual revelation of God in the incarnate Christ, particularly in light of the eschatological timeframe, serves as a more Catholic and theologically compelling rationale for Reformed theology and practice.

Among the more obscure debates of the Reformation era was the numbering of the Decalogue. That the commandments were ten was not in dispute, but the means for arriving at that total was. On the one hand, Roman Catholics and Lutherans viewed ‘You shall have no other gods before me’ and ‘You shall not make for yourself any graven image’ as a single command, and separated ‘You shall not covet your neighbor’s house’ and ‘You shall not covet your neighbor’s wife’ into two regulations. On the other hand, the Reformed (following the practice of Eastern Christianity) separated Rome’s first commandment into distinct precepts and enclosed the coveting commands into a single precept. Lying beneath a seemingly inconsequential, yet intense, squabble was the fact that the numbering of the commandments had very practical ethical and spiritual implications for Reformed churches.¹ Taking the first

* Westminster Theological Seminary, 1725 Bear Valley Parkway, Escondido, CA 92027, USA.

- 1 On the intensity and consequences of this debate in the Reformation era, see David C. Steinmetz, ‘The Reformation and the Ten Commandments’, *Interpretation* 43 (1989), pp. 257–8.

commandment ('You shall have no other gods before me') as speaking about *whom* we should worship, Reformed theologians read the second commandment as teaching *how* we should worship this one God (namely, only as commanded in scripture). Though the Reformed believed that many aspects of the church's life were implicated in the second commandment, one of the most obvious in fact lay on the face of the commandment itself: the making and worshiping of images. The Reformed tended to shun all manufacture and use of religious images. This included, most importantly, any visual portrayals of the incarnate Son of God, which is the particular focus of this article.²

In the inscrutable workings of church history, these ethical strictures and their consequences for Christian spirituality must be acknowledged as rather distinctively Reformed. The Reformed attitude contrasts most sharply with the iconography of Roman Catholicism and especially Eastern Orthodoxy. Yet even Lutherans, their Reformation colleagues, could not follow the stringent Reformed prohibition of images of Christ, though they certainly had their differences with Rome on these matters as well. To be sure, strong opposition to images emerged in early Christianity, and fierce objections to the forces that ultimately secured victory for the opponents of iconoclasm at the so-called Seventh Ecumenical Council at Nicea in 787 endured for many years.³ But subsequent church history expressed little iconoclastic sentiment – until it burst forth suddenly in the Reformed wing of the Reformation.⁴ In light of this history, many theologians have somewhat understandably dismissed the Reformed position as idiosyncratic and non-Catholic. Further complicating the Reformed isolation on the image issue is the fact that its position has been buttressed by some arguments that are unjustly oblivious to the concerns of most of the Christian world and have been less than compelling, even to many of its own theologians. Perhaps for all of these reasons the traditional Reformed practice has become more lax in many Reformed circles, including those that remain markedly conservative in other areas of doctrine and life. Theologians generally committed to the Reformed tradition have offered cautious criticism of the

2 In debates in the Christian church about religious imagery, icons of Christ have often been the central concern. On the centrality of icons of Christ in the iconoclast controversies of the eighth-century Byzantine Church, see Ambrosios Giakalis, *Images of the Divine: The Theology of Icons at the Seventh Ecumenical Council* (New York: Brill, 1994), p. 93.

3 Note the admittedly puzzling development that Jaroslav Pelikan sets out to answer: 'that a faith which began by attacking the worship of images and by resisting it to the death . . . eventually embraced such worship and turned prohibition into permission—and permission into command'. See Jaroslav Pelikan, *Imago Dei: The Byzantine Apologia for Icons* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1990).

4 Alain Besancon observes that between the year 843 and the sixteenth century, 'the West peacefully produced a phenomenal number of images, its heart and mind rarely troubled'. Alain Besancon, *The Forbidden Image: An Intellectual History of Iconoclasm* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2000), p. 147.

strict Reformed position.⁵ It seems, perhaps, to be a feature of the Reformed heritage whose time has passed.

In this article, I approach this subject with a twofold task, whose prongs may seem in fact to move in contrary directions. On the one hand, in contrast to much prevailing opinion in my own Reformed circles, I propose that the traditional Reformed prohibition on the manufacture and use of images of Christ is theologically sound and thus worthy of a contemporary defense. On the other hand, however, I propose that this position be defended not on idiosyncratic grounds that sever Reformed practice from the broader Christian tradition, but rather on Catholic grounds that in fact root the Reformed practice in the theological concerns of this broader tradition. To be more specific, I argue that the Reformed prohibition of images of Christ ought to be defended because of – not in spite of – the Catholic doctrine of the incarnation. At the same time, I make an argument that is decidedly different from the eighth-century iconoclasts' arguments from the incarnation, arguments that were rightly rejected by the church. I argue, instead, that the specificity of the visual revelation of God in the incarnate Christ, particularly in light of the eschatological timeframe, commends the Reformed avoidance of images of Jesus. Therefore, this article is both an exercise of faith seeking understanding of the Reformed tradition and an attempt at ecumenical dialogue on the second commandment.

Traditional Reformed rationales

To set the stage for my argument, I first consider briefly the sorts of rationales that have traditionally animated Reformed expositions of the second commandment in regard to images of the Deity. In general, a rather straightforward deontological claim has served as foundation for the Reformed position: scripture prohibits making and using images of God, and thus Christians ought to avoid them, including representations of Jesus Christ, since he is himself true and eternal God. However, Reformed theologians were not always agreed on the conclusive value of a simple appeal to the Decalogue,⁶ and thus have searched for rationales to explain why God would impose such a duty and why such a duty still remains. There are five distinct

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- 5 See, for example, Harry Boonstra, 'Of Images and Image Breakers', *Calvin Theological Journal* 32 (1997), pp. 423–31. Boonstra's concerns with the Reformed position seem largely centered around deficient rationales historically given for it, in most of which instances I concur with him.
- 6 Some scholars have noted that Luther's early colleague and later opponent, Andreas Karlstadt, based his opposition to images on appeals to the Old Law to a much greater degree than did Swiss Reformers Ulrich Zwingli and John Calvin. For example, see Sergiusz Michalski, *The Reformation and the Visual Arts: The Protestant Image Question in Western and Eastern Europe* (New York: Routledge, 1993), p. 54; and Steinmetz, 'The Reformation', pp. 258–60. On Calvin's analysis of the second commandment, see Michalski, *The Reformation*, pp. 65–6.

– though certainly related – lines of argument that I identify. I find these rationales of various degrees of persuasiveness, and I cannot address each one specifically. Here I focus on the fifth, however, which has proven especially important and yet, at the same time, rather vulnerable to objection from the perspective of Catholic Christianity.

A first rationale for the Reformed prohibition of images typically takes the character of a *reductio ad absurdum* argument, echoing older Jewish thinking on the second commandment.⁷ Since the manufacture and use of religious images almost inevitably leads to outright idolatry, the path that leads there ought to be avoided.⁸ As John Calvin explained, sinful human beings want to follow their own imaginations rather than what is revealed in the scriptures, and the making of divine images constitutes precisely a substitution of what God has given for what human creativity can produce. An image that is meant only to stir the emotions or instruct the unlearned comes quickly to become the thing that is worshiped.⁹ A second line of argument that is quite closely related to the first was emphasized by Calvin and has been picked up and discussed at length by some contemporary Reformed writers.¹⁰ According to this argument, the making of images is a manifestation of the desire of sinners to control the deity. Human beings want a God that answers to their beck and call, one that they can produce when desired and stash away when not desired. Even ancient pagans did not really think that their idols *were* their gods or that their gods looked exactly like their visible representations, as Reformed theologians have noted. Instead, pagans wanted to control access to their gods, and images provided the perfect resource. According to Reformed lights, then, Christian use of images of the deity constituted an incomplete break from paganism and represented a dangerous flirtation with self-deification.

7 For example, Moses Maimonides, *Guide of the Perplexed*, vol. 1 (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1963), p. 59. See discussion of Maimonides' views in Leora Batnitzky, 'Schoenberg's *Moses und Aron* and the Judaic Ban on Images', *Journal for the Study of the Old Testament* 92 (2001), pp. 74–5.

8 John Calvin, *Sermons on the Ten Commandments*, trans. and ed. Benjamin W. Farley (Grand Rapids: Baker, 1980), pp. 65–6; Francis Turretin, *Institutes of Elenctic Theology*, vol. 2 (Phillipsburg, NJ: Presbyterian and Reformed, 1994), p. 64; Charles Hodge, *Systematic Theology*, vol. 3 (repr. Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1995), pp. 303–5; J. Douma, *The Ten Commandments* (Phillipsburg, NJ: Presbyterian & Reformed, 1996), p. 37.

9 Note Hodge's rather remarkable autobiographical reflections: 'No one who has ever seen any of the masterpieces of Christian art, whether of the pencil or of the chisel, and felt how hard it is to resist the impulse to "bow down to them and serve them," can doubt the wisdom of their exclusion from places of public worship' (*Systematic Theology*, vol. 3, pp. 304–5).

10 John Calvin, *Institutes of the Christian Religion*, 1.11.1; 1.11.9; Michael S. Horton, *The Law of Perfect Freedom* (Chicago: Moody, 1994), pp. 79–81; Douma, *Ten Commandments*, pp. 37–41. Though not dealing explicitly with the second commandment, a similar concern is expressed in Richard Lints, 'Imaging and Idolatry: The Sociality of Personhood and the Ironic Reversals of the Canon' (paper presented at the Alliance of Confessing Evangelicals' Summer Colloquium, June, 2002).

A third rationale presented by Reformed thinkers points to the sufficiency of what God has ordained in scripture for Christians' vibrant religious life. Not only does God not want to be approached through images, but people just do not need images to enjoy a rich spirituality. The written and preached word of scripture is a sufficient source for believers' instruction; no visual images are necessary as 'tools for the unlearned'.¹¹ Further, so this line of argument goes, God has in fact become visually manifest in the sacrament of the Lord's Supper.¹² The covenant bond between God and the church is such as to require no supplementation with images.¹³ The fourth rationale, which is only occasionally pursued by Reformed writers, is that, due to our ignorance of Christ's bodily features, there is no portrait of Christ that is authentic.¹⁴ To this argument I return in detail below.

A fifth and final traditional Reformed rationale for the second commandment is one of particular importance and, for that reason, deserving of critical scrutiny. The argument is that invisibility or spirituality is one of the divine attributes, and that any attempt to portray God visibly is to misrepresent the nature of God and inevitably to darken the divine majesty and glory. This argument, in one form or another, is a standard feature of Reformed treatments of the second commandment, both older and more recent.¹⁵ Appeal is often made to Deuteronomy 4:15–19, where Moses grounds his exhortation to refrain from image-making and image-worship in the fact that the people did not see any 'form' on the day that God spoke to them at Horeb out of the fire. The formlessness of God supposes divine unrepresentability.

Despite the popularity of this argument, it is certainly not without its difficulties. Even a second look at the Deuteronomy 4:15–19 proof-text reveals that it has been forced to say something other than it actually does. Deuteronomy 4:15 does not teach that God *has* no form – as the traditional argument seems often to understand it – but that the people *saw* no form, and those two things are not necessarily the same.

11 Calvin, *Institutes*, 1.11.5; Horton, *Law*, pp. 82–7. The idea of images as 'tools for the unlearned' dates back at least to Gregory the Great (see Michalski, *The Reformation*, p. 29) and was utilized later by the iconophiles in the debates surrounding the Seventh Ecumenical Council (see Giakalis, *Images of the Divine*, p. 56). Besancon claims that the medieval Western church was much more interested in this pedagogical function of images than in the metaphysical issues that dominated the Eastern theology of icons (*The Forbidden Image*, p. 4). The Roman Catholic Church also appealed to Gregory's idea in its response to the Reformers at the Council of Trent: *Canons and Decrees of the Council of Trent*, ed. H.J. Schroeder, OP (St Louis: Herder, 1950), p. 216.

12 Calvin, *Institutes*, 1.11.13; Horton, *Law*, p. 92.

13 Douma, *Ten Commandments*, pp. 42–3.

14 See Robert L. Dabney, *Systematic Theology* (1871; repr. Edinburgh: Banner of Truth, 1985), p. 362.

15 Calvin, *Sermons*, pp. 66–7; *Institutes*, 1.11.1–2; Turretin, *Institutes*, vol. 2, pp. 63–4; Hodge, *Systematic Theology*, vol. 3, p. 290; Dabney, *Systematic Theology*, p. 363; Horton, *Law*, p. 90; Douma, *Ten Commandments*, pp. 41–2; *Heidelberg Catechism*, Q&A 97.

The appeal is to history rather than to metaphysics or ontology.¹⁶ Yet, does an ontological reality lie behind this historical appeal, namely, that a spiritual God must also be unseeable? While it is true that the scriptures occasionally speak of God as invisible (for example, in 1 Tim. 1:17; 6:16), much more pervasive is the promise that people not only can but will see God. The examples of this that can be gleaned from both Old and New Testaments are impressive, yet represent only a sampling: Psalm 17:15 ('when I awake I will be satisfied in seeing your likeness'); Psalm 27:4 ('One thing I ask of the Lord . . . to look upon the beauty of the Lord . . .'); Hebrews 12:14 ('Pursue . . . holiness, without which no one will see the Lord'); and 1 John 3:2 ('for we will see him as he is'). Of course, even Moses himself, who speaks the programmatic words of Deuteronomy 4:15, asserted no ontology of divine unseeability. Else it was a strange hypocrisy when Moses dared to command God, 'Now show me your glory' (Ex. 33:18), an order that was only partially fulfilled, as Moses caught a glimpse of God's back but not face (Ex. 33:22).

That the scriptures can speak so often and so confidently about seeing God – and this as the pinnacle of Christian eschatological hope – might be rather disconcerting, not only to Reformed theologians but to many in other Christian traditions who take seriously the spirituality of God and the occasionally absolute biblical statement about the impossibility of seeing God. Can one affirm, with the scriptures, both the unseeability of God and the hope of seeing God, contradictory as they at first seem? The Christian doctrine of revelation provides a conceptual framework for making such a dual affirmation without lapsing into theological incoherence: God, though invisible, can also be seen, if God so reveals. The doctrine of revelation works in analogous manner in regard to other matters. God is unknowable, because the finite human mind is incapable of comprehending the infinite divine mind. Yet, in revelation, God provides knowledge of the divine in a manner accommodated to human capacities. Likewise, God is inaudible, having no lungs, larynx or tongue with which to be heard. Yet, in revelation, God becomes heard through the medium of created things. And thus it may be true that while God, having no body parts, is invisible and not subject to space and time, in revelation God is made visible in and through creation. Conceptually, Reformed theology should have no greater difficulty with the idea of seeing God than it does with the ideas of knowing or hearing God. Indeed, God cannot be seen – but there is a qualifier that must always be attached to such a claim: unless God is made manifest through revelation. Precisely the same dynamic is present in regard to knowing and hearing God: God cannot be known or heard – unless God is made knowable and audible through revelation.

In Deuteronomy 4:15, then, the point is not that God has no form in some absolute, ontological sense, but that God's form was not *revealed* to the ancient

16 For a concurring, though not identical, conclusion from the perspective of Ancient Near Eastern scholarship, see Brian B. Schmidt, 'The Aniconic Tradition: On Reading Images and Viewing Texts', in Diana Vikander Edelman, ed., *The Triumph of Elohim: From Yahwisms to Judaisms* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1996), p. 96.

Israelites. It is interesting to note that Deuteronomy seems to take exactly the same approach toward hearing God as toward seeing God. 4:2 commands the people neither to subtract from the words that God had spoken nor to add to them. In 5:22, immediately following the giving of the Decalogue, Moses states that God had spoken these words – *and no others*. A similar refrain sounds again in 12:32, which reminds that nothing is to be added to what God has spoken. *In se*, God cannot be heard, but in revelation God becomes audible. And thus the people are prohibited from creating their own supposed ‘words’ of God beyond what is revealed. Likewise, *in se*, God cannot be seen, and Deuteronomy 4:15 reminds the people that insofar as God’s revelation has not made the invisible visible, they are not to make God visible by their own initiative.

Thus, Deuteronomy 4:15 provides a strict prohibition of images of the Deity – not absolutely, however, but only until God stoops to become visible in revelation. If and when this happens, Deuteronomy 4:15 is no longer a sufficient rationale for such a prohibition. Of course, one of the great confessions of the Christian faith is that God *has* stooped to become visible through revelation, in the incarnation of the Son.¹⁷ Though God revealed no form on Mount Sinai, or even in the subsequent Old Testament theophanies, God did take on form in Jesus Christ. The New Testament offers a great deal of testimony on this point, culminating, perhaps, in the dramatic and programmatic statement in the Gospel of John: ‘He who has seen me has seen the Father’ (John 14:9). This great event must prompt Christians to read Deuteronomy 4:15 in a new light. God revealed no form at Horeb indeed, but has now revealed it in the Son of God, Jesus Christ. How does this affirmation affect the Christian’s view of the second commandment and its prohibition of images?

The incarnation and the second commandment

The most focused and important debate in the Christian church over images of Christ culminated in the Seventh Ecumenical Council, at Nicea, in 787. Though the issues were sharply contested and extreme denunciations were exchanged, the iconophiles (literally, the ‘image-lovers’) and the iconoclasts (the ‘image-smashers’) agreed that christological matters were at the forefront of discussion. Even the heavily political cast of many of the events leading up to the Council could not dampen the necessity of thinking through the doctrine of the incarnation.¹⁸ At the end of the day, the

17 A similar sort of argument in regard to the Old Testament prohibition of images and its fulfillment and abolition by the incarnation emerged in some of the Byzantine iconophile reflection on the icon controversies. See Pelikan, *Imago Dei*, p. 81; and Charles Barber, *Figure and Likeness: On the Limits of Representation in Byzantine Iconoclasm* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2002), p. 71.

18 For discussion of the political versus theological/christological nature of the Seventh Ecumenical Council, see Giakalis, *Images of the Divine*, p. 130; and Pelikan, *Imago Dei*, pp. 70–1. Besancon comments in regard to the iconoclastic controversies: ‘Its causes

christological arguments of the iconophiles prevailed.¹⁹ They did not prevail, however, without a fight.

Christological issues had predominated debate in the previous ecumenical councils, and this last council was a continuation of the same. As the heterodox Christologies known as Arianism, Appolinarianism, Nestorianism, Monophysitism and Monotheletism were successively condemned, both iconoclasm and iconphilism emerged as potential additions to this notorious list. The church had come to agree, more or less, that the incarnate Christ was two natures, true God and true human being, in one person. But how to express this truth without either compromising his complete humanity or losing the reality of the union of the natures was not at all easy. Appolinarianism, Monophysitism and Monotheletism had all made Christ into something other than a complete human being, while Nestorianism compromised the reality of the union of the natures. Some iconoclasts argued that the iconophiles were untrue to the established christological tradition by inevitably falling into either Monophysitism (hypostatic union at the expense of true humanity) or Nestorianism (true humanity at the expense of hypostatic union). If icons are treated as portraying the divinity of Christ, the iconoclasts alleged, then the two natures have been unjustly mixed, as in Monophysitism. Conversely, the iconoclasts continued, if iconophiles view their icons as simply portrayals of Christ's humanity, then the reality of the hypostatic union has been denied, as in Nestorianism.²⁰ The iconophile position was a christological heresy – it was only a matter of which one.

Of course, the iconophiles disagreed and returned charges of christological heresy against the iconoclasts. The iconophiles were clearer about where their opponents' error lay: in the Appolinarian-Monophysitist-Monotheletist line of denying the incarnation through denying Christ's true humanity.²¹ In one of the most notable polemical works of this era, John of Damascus repeatedly castigates iconoclasm on the basis of the reality of the Son's incarnation and, beyond this, the goodness of the material world that God created.²² A recent Eastern Orthodox

were so complex that they can dishearten the sage historian. Of course, dogma was at the root of the problem' (*The Forbidden Image*, p. 114). Pelikan (*Imago Dei*, pp. 7–39) provides helpful context in his overview of the Byzantine political tradition.

- 19 For the decisions of the Seventh Ecumenical Council, see *Nicene and Post-Nicene Fathers*, vol. 14, *The Seven Ecumenical Councils*, Second Series, ed. Philip Schaff and Henry Wace (1900; repr. Peabody, MA: Hendrickson, 1994), pp. 523–87; and Daniel J. Sahas, *Icon and Logos: Sources in Eighth-Century Iconoclasm* (Toronto: University of Toronto Press, 1986). Giakalis (*Images of the Divine*, pp. 1–21) also overviews the history of the Seventh Ecumenical Council.
- 20 See, for example, Giakalis, *Images of the Divine*, pp. 10, 93–6; Besancon, *The Forbidden Image*, pp. 125–6; and Barber, *Figure and Likeness*, pp. 78–9.
- 21 At the Seventh Ecumenical Council, an Eastern bishop named John proclaimed: 'This heresy is the worst of all heresies. Woe to the iconoclasts! It is the worst of heresies, as it subverts the incarnation . . . of our Saviour'. See Schaff and Wace, *Nicene and Post-Nicene Fathers*, vol. 14, p. 535.
- 22 St John Damascene, *On Holy Images* (London: Thomas Baker, 1898). Some recent interpreters of the Seventh Ecumenical Council have joined John in pressing the critique

theologian agrees: 'Iconoclasm was certainly another way of denying that Christ is man in a concrete and individual manner.'²³ The logic is that if Christ cannot be portrayed, if he is not circumscribable, then he is not truly incarnate. Or, to put it positively, if Christ has become a true human being, then it must be possible to represent him visibly. Hence Meyendorff's conclusion: 'The victory over iconoclasm was a reaffirmation of Chalcedonian and post-Chalcedonian Christology.'²⁴ To the iconoclasts' charge of christological heresy, the iconophiles denied that Christ was to be absolutely identified, by nature or essence, with the icon. Hence, the Monophysitism/Nestorian dilemma posed by the iconoclasts was overcome.²⁵

The christological debate over icons was thus officially won by the iconophiles. The question arises, then, whether Reformed theology's refusal to make or use images of Christ reflects a deficient or even deviant view of the incarnation. Suspicions of this sort are difficult to reconcile with the fact that the Reformed not only enthusiastically upheld the Chalcedonian formulae concerning the two natures joined in one person in the hypostatic union, but also have even explicitly defended these doctrines against contemporary teachings that seemed to stray from the traditional doctrine. The most prominent case in point is found in Reformed polemics against the 'ubiquitarian' Christology of Lutheranism. For many years, Lutherans and Reformed have disputed the nature of Christ's presence in the Eucharist, and lying immediately beneath the surface of these debates is a christological disagreement that in large part determines the eucharistic questions. According to the Lutheran understanding of the *communicatio idiomatum*, divine attributes of Christ are communicated to his human nature, though the manifestation of these attributes was hidden during his days on earth. Among the divine attributes communicated is omnipresence: Christ's human body, now glorified, is present everywhere with his divine nature.²⁶ Hence the 'ubiquitarian' title and the confidence that Christ's body and blood can be truly in, with, and under the elements of bread and wine.

Reformed theologians, unimpressed, have suggested that the only reason that Lutherans would want to defend such an idea was because of the need for christological justification for their theology of the Supper.²⁷ To Reformed minds, Lutheran ubiquitarianism was little more than a lapse into Monophysitism, an absorption of the human nature into the divine, hence leaving no true human nature

of iconoclasm beyond misunderstanding of the incarnation to discomfort with the goodness of the material world generally. See, for example, Giakalis, *Images of the Divine*, ch. 4.

23 John Meyendorff, *Byzantine Theology* (New York: Fordham University Press, 1975), p. 158.

24 Meyendorff, *Byzantine Theology*, p. 159.

25 See, for example, Besancon, *The Forbidden Image*, p. 130.

26 For example, see *Formula of Concord*, Article 7; and Francis Pieper, *Christian Dogmatics*, vol. 2 (St Louis: Concordia, 1951), pp. 129–279.

27 For example, see the discussion in Hodge, *Systematic Theology*, vol. 2, pp. 414–15.

at all. A human body that is omnipresent is nothing like the human body that we know, and it virtually requires a whole new definition of what a human body is. If Christ's body is omnipresent, then he is no longer like us in every way, sin excepted. Whatever the best resolution to this debate, the Reformed saw themselves as stout defenders of Catholic christological orthodoxy. Far from denying the full reality of Christ's human nature, and even far from being insensitive to implications of the Chalcedonian affirmations, the Reformed unflinchingly grasped the Chalcedonian legacy as their own.

Even in grasping the Chalcedonian legacy, however, Reformed theologians have seemed to do relatively little thinking about its consequences for the second commandment issue.²⁸ This fact, I believe, is unfortunate and has hindered the ability of the Reformed to communicate and discuss their position on images of Christ with those in other Christian traditions. On the one hand, the Reformed properly refused to adopt spurious Chalcedonian arguments such as those sometimes offered by the eighth-century iconoclasts.²⁹ The reality of the hypostatic union does not make Christ ontologically 'uncircumscribable'. On the other hand, to overlook the christological dimensions of the issue is a major omission. If Reformed Christianity is to continue to abstain from the making and use of images of Christ, it owes it both to itself and to other Christian traditions to explain its position in the light of Chalcedonian Christology. In the remainder of this article I offer a proposal for how this might be done.

Though I refuse to adopt the iconoclastic line of reasoning that the reality of the incarnation prohibits making an authentic image of Christ on ontological grounds, I do propose that there are other grounds for questioning the possibility of producing such an authentic image. Historical, eschatological reasons exist for questioning the possibility of an authentic image of Christ *at the present time*. Christology does not need to deny that contemporaries of Jesus – who saw him – could have drawn, sculpted, or photographed him just as they could any other person. Nor should it question the Christian hope of seeing Christ again. But it does, I argue, present serious objections to those wishing to portray Christ visibly now, when he is no longer physically present. That an authentic image of Christ is ontologically possible, as the iconophiles argued, is granted; but such an image is authentic only if it attempts to represent Christ's actual appearance.

28 This is true already of Calvin. Michalski remarks that 'The question of incarnation as an argument [for his view of the second commandment] does not appear in Calvin's frame of reference', which explains why his remarks about the iconoclastic controversies are 'occasional and unsystematic' (*The Reformation*, p. 66).

29 To whatever extent Zwingli is considered part of the Reformed tradition, he may constitute an exception to the non-iconoclastic nature of Reformed argumentation for its position. See Michalski, *The Reformation*, p. 56. Besancon does paint Calvin's position as rather similar to those of the Byzantine iconoclasts, but in doing so gives too little weight to his aesthetic sensitivities. Compare Besancon, *The Forbidden Image*, pp. 4, 186–7 with the Calvin who is astounded by the glory of God in the natural universe in *Institutes*, 1.5.1.

As the great iconophile John of Damascus argued long ago, the reason that no image of God was permitted under the Old Testament was because only in the incarnation of Christ was humanity presented with a genuine and accurate similitude of God.³⁰ Only with the appearance of *Jesus of Nazareth* did God become circumscribable. 'The Word became flesh' in Jesus Christ and him alone. Surely this demands taking seriously his particularity. In assuming human nature, the Son of God took on a physical body with a certain set of defined attributes. Jesus Christ was not an abstract human being, but a man with particular features and characteristics. He was a certain height and weight, his hair and eyes certain colors, his skin a particular pigmentation. His nose and mouth had a form unique to him. This human body, in all its particularities, was the result of the incarnation. In the face of these particularities, the images of Christ that adorn churches, art galleries and crèches are notable for their dissimilarities. The images portray Christ as blond and brunette, brawny and lean, handsome and ugly, fair and swarthy. What they all do have in common is that none of them actually portrays *Jesus Christ*. None of them portrays the man who, with particular physical features and characteristics, walked this earth two millennia ago. And certainly none of them portrays the resurrected Christ who has ascended to the right hand of the Father. The issue returns to the point made above: God is visible and therefore portrayable only as provided by revelation (just as God can be heard and therefore spoken of only as provided by revelation). Any human flesh and blood beside that of Jesus Christ is not the visible revelation of God.

In fact, the making of images of Christ that are not based upon the man Christ himself runs the danger of falling into a primal temptation: creating a God in one's own image. One need only compare crèches from different parts of the world. The human figures typically appear Asian or Caucasian or African in accordance with their provenance in Asia, Europe, or Africa. Recently I observed a T-shirt in a coastal Southern California town displaying a Jesus hanging on the cross with a chiseled physique and rippling abdominal muscles. The representations of Christ often look strikingly like images of the artists or at least their projections of ideal human appearance. It may be possible, of course, to avoid this urge to create a Christ after one's own image. An artist might meticulously portray a Christ that looks very much like a first century Jewish man, however little this may look like the artist herself. Or, as has sometimes been the practice in Christian iconography, an artist might produce a Christ with intentionally distorted features, meant to avoid any suggestion that a photographic likeness is intended. And in all sorts of other art, as well, artists construct pictures of historical figures – religious or otherwise – whose appearance they do not know nor do they claim to know; yet, without any thought of moral difficulty, they display their representations for purposes of instruction, memorial or honor. It is not immediately obvious why such morally unobjectionable practices meet Reformed objection in the case of portraying Christ.

30 See Pelikan, *Imago Dei*, p. 81.

The difference, I argue, lies in the uniqueness of Christ's person discussed above. To construct imaginary pictures of, say, Moses or Alexander the Great does not raise the sort of issues raised by constructing imaginary pictures of Christ because Moses and Alexander make no claims to be divine as well as human. Because Jesus Christ is the incarnate God, any attempt to portray him must confront the biblical warning: do not make images of God (if you do not have access to God's visibility). Thus, creating imaginative pictures of Moses or Alexander is of qualitatively different order from creating an imaginative picture of Jesus.

Therefore, no difficulty exists in portraying Moses or Alexander with general human features, portraying Jesus in such a way is problematic from a Christian, incarnational perspective. God can only be seen, and therefore portrayed, in Jesus Christ, and Jesus Christ was not generic humanity with general human features, but a particular human being with specific features. The incarnation of the Son of God does indeed make God portrayable, but there is no authentic portrait of Jesus that is not based upon his historical, particular features. This claim is not meant to commend one artistic style over another. Certainly, Jesus could be portrayed in different ways by different artists adopting different styles of representation. A photograph is not the only authentic image! My claim instead is that, whatever the artist's style, the object of representation must not be of the artist's imagination but the incarnate Christ with his particular bodily features.

In an outstanding recent work by art historian Charles Barber, the Byzantine iconophile theology is described as moving remarkably close to this very concern. For the iconophiles, claims Barber, icons of Christ were not representations of a generalized human nature imagined by the artist. Instead, as one iconophile church leader put it, 'a true icon remains dependent upon the prior existence of the thing shown'. Barber comments: 'These iconophiles argued that the concern of the artist was with the art alone, while the content conveyed by the work of art was prior to the artist and not subject to an intervention by that artist.'³¹ In this way, the authenticity of the icon was preserved and therefore also its ability to communicate truth. However, while Byzantine iconography granted specific features to the imaged Jesus, the need for these features to correspond in some way to Jesus' actual features was not recognized.³² In my judgement, the legitimate iconophile concern described by Barber needs to be augmented by the concern that an icon that communicates merely the *fact* of the incarnation of God with particular human features has still produced a visual representation of God that is not based upon the visual revelation of God, which is not of a fact but of a particular person.

Perhaps buttressing these last concerns is another point of difference between portraying Jesus and portraying Moses or Alexander or other historical figure: it is only with Jesus that Christians claim to have some real relationship. The fact of covenantal – to use favored Reformed terminology – relationship with Christ makes

31 Barber, *Figure and Likeness*, pp. 111–12.

32 See Barber, *Figure and Likeness*, p. 118.

portrayal of him a much different matter from portrayal of any other historical figure. The significance of such a relationship might be illustrated by analogizing the portraying of Christ to a person's portraying of his or her spouse. Imagine a husband who carries in his wallet a picture of a woman. The picture is not of his wife, but he pretends that it is and acts like it is. He takes it out of his wallet periodically and gazes at it. He shows it to others and tells them that it is his wife. The oddness of this practice may lie most notably in the fact that this man has married a particular woman, not a general female human being with a negotiable set of features. He has a sacred, intimate, covenant-like relationship with *her*, and most wives, presumably, would be rather unhappy to learn that their husbands were attempting to enjoy that relationship through a means that treats her as if her body does not really constitute her. In fact, her husband has relationship with *her*, body and soul, and a picture of another woman substitutes something that is not her. Likewise, it is with *Christ*, true God and true man, incarnate in a uniquely particular body and soul, that the Christian has a sacred, intimate, covenantal relationship, and a picture of another, anonymous man substitutes something that is not him.³³

The argument, as it has been made thus far, has generally proceeded by examining the question whether those who desire to produce or use images of Christ in the present time have christological warrant for doing so. But another, and perhaps even more important, christologically-oriented question also begs to be asked. Ought Christians even *desire* to portray Christ? The answer, I argue in the next section, is a qualified 'No'. In light of Christians' christological, eschatological hope, the desire to see Christ is healthy and proper. However, the fact that it is a christological, eschatological *hope* also asks Christians to be patient in anticipating the fulfillment of their legitimate desire and, therefore, to acknowledge that the present is not the time for seeing Christ.

The christological, eschatological hope and the second commandment

To speak about the Christian's eschatological hope is to speak, in traditional Christian language, of the Catholic doctrine of the beatific vision. Puzzlingly, the beatific vision is not often considered in connection with the second commandment, though both issues concern the seeing of God. Perhaps the reason why these issues are seldom related is because of the shape that the beatific vision doctrine typically

33 One objection to the conclusions drawn from this analogy may be that no wife would object to her husband, when telling a story about his family to a group of children, drawing a stereotypical female stick-figure of 'her' as a way to illustrate the story. At most, this line of thinking would justify use of images only for purposes of instruction, not for veneration. However, I would argue that this objection exposes a flaw in the analogy rather than a flaw in my christological argument. Even to whatever extent a husband's imaginary picture of his wife does not violate their unique, particular relationship, such a picture never has to deal with the issue of the conditions under which God is made visible and can therefore be portrayed.

assumed. The idea of the beatific vision derives directly from scripture, which, as noted above, holds out the seeing of God in eternity as the pinnacle of the Christian's eschatological hope. As traditionally understood, however, the sight that the beatific vision will provide is quite radically unlike sight as we understand it now. Medieval scholasticism taught that the eschatological vision of God will be enjoyed not with bodily, sensory eyes, but with one's heightened, supernaturally-endowed cognitive faculties.³⁴ This idea was also generally adopted by Reformed scholastic theologians.³⁵ A treatment of the issue by a Roman Catholic theologian not long ago shows how this doctrine persevered into the twentieth century. He writes that the essence of heaven is seeing God face to face, and that this is an act of contemplation and love. He asks what this vision will be, and answers: 'It will be a vision without any sense or any thought-images.' Nothing bodily, nothing physical, nor anything sensory – either on the part of God or human beings – will intrude, for God is incorporeal. Instead, God 'will be within our mind itself, and there we shall see him'. The beatific vision is reached, he writes, when our knowledge attains to God directly. 'We must not, therefore, imagine God in the Beatific Vision as some outside Object to look at, but as dwelling within the very essence of our soul, and thus being perceived from within by direct contact.'³⁶

Such a presentation of the doctrine is remarkable in a number of ways from the perspective of controversies over the imaging of Christ. First, it is strikingly anti-physical and anti-sensory: though it does not deny the resurrection of the body, it assigns the body no role in the enjoyment of supreme blessedness. Second, it is strikingly Christ-less: though it does not deny that to see the incarnate Christ is to see God, it discusses the eternal vision in terms of the possibility of seeing the God who is incorporeal. It is little wonder, then, that the second commandment and the beatific vision have been disconnected. While debates about portraying Christ have revolved so centrally around the reality of the incarnation and the goodness of the material creation, these great truths are almost inexplicably banished from discussions about the eternal vision of God.³⁷ Renewing discussion about the beatific vision in terms of the incarnation and the goodness of creation provides a necessary link between the beatific vision and the second commandment. It provides, I argue, additional theological support for the traditional Reformed prohibition of making visible representations of Christ.

34 For example, see Thomas Aquinas, *Summa Theologiae*, Supplement, 92.1–2.

35 For example, see Turretin, *Institutes*, vol. 3, pp. 608–17. However, Heinrich Heppé's collection of Reformed scholastic opinion on this issue reveals an undercurrent of the view that I adopt below, namely, that beatific vision is ultimately about seeing the incarnate Christ. See Heppé, *Reformed Dogmatics* (repr. Grand Rapids: Baker, 1978), p. 707.

36 J.P. Arendzen, 'Heaven, or the Church Triumphant', in George D. Smith, ed., *The Teaching of the Catholic Church* (New York: Macmillan, 1962), vol. 2, pp. 1249–54.

37 Turretin, almost incidentally, seems to interpret Job 19:25 and 1 John 3:2 as referring to the vision of the incarnate Son. See *Institutes*, vol. 3, p. 610.

As addressed above, God is by nature invisible, as well as inaudible and incomprehensible. But God acts in revelation and, in so doing, is seen, heard and understood. In thinking about the sight of God, one cannot bypass the Son to reach the Father. In John 14, Jesus proclaimed that no one comes to the Father except through him. When Thomas told Jesus that it would be sufficient for them if he showed them the Father, Jesus responded with the striking words: 'Whoever has seen me has seen the Father.' The human desire to see the Father – the unincarnate, incorporeal, invisible God – is satisfied only in the incarnate, corporeal, visible Son of God. The traditional doctrine of the beatific visions smells much like the longing that Thomas expressed to Christ, but which Christ redirected and refocused toward himself. The New Testament itself suggests that the eschatological vision of God is precisely the vision of the resurrected, everlastingly-incarnate Son.³⁸ At the same time, nothing in the New Testament suggests that resurrection bodies – including resurrection eyes – will not have an intimate role in the enjoyment of eternal blessedness. In fact, the New Testament teaching on the incarnation of Christ and the resurrection of the body brings to clarity the substance of the hope that Job cryptically expressed long before: 'and after my skin has been destroyed, yet in my flesh I will see God. I will see him; my eyes and not another will see him' (Job 19:26–27).

If it is true that the incarnation has everything to do with the beatific vision, then the beatific vision has everything to do with the second commandment. Discussion of the visibility of Christ now through artistic representation looks backward to the incarnation (as the Catholic tradition has long recognized), but also looks ahead to the beatific vision. The seeing of Christ in the present – or lack thereof – is defined by the seeing of Christ in the past and the seeing of Christ in the future. In the light of the New Testament teaching about the seeing of God in the eschatological future, the New Testament is striking in its description of the present age as one of *not* seeing God in Christ. The New Testament consistently, across genres and authors, speaks about the present invisibility of Christ in view of the eternal. Christ speaks in the context of his ascension and the coming of the Spirit in the Gospel of John when he states: 'After a little while, you will see me no longer, and again after a little while, and you will see me' (John 16:16). The age of the Spirit is an age of Christ's presence, to be sure, but an age of his invisible presence, to be followed by his reappearance. The context is similar for Paul's words in 2 Corinthians 5:7. In speaking about the present age as one of being at home in the body and away from the Lord, with the hope of the resurrection looming, Paul states that 'we walk by faith, not by sight'. Sight does not characterize the present age, but it will mark the age to come. Similar remarks pertain to 1 Peter 1. The context, once again, concerns the eternal inheritance and salvation to be revealed in the last time (1:4–5) – and the sufferings that shape the present time (1:6–7). Then comes the climactic statement: 'Though not seeing him, you love him, and though not seeing

38 See, for example, John 16:16; 2 Cor. 5:7; and 1 Pet. 1:8, in their contexts, all of which are addressed below.

him now, you believe in him and rejoice with an indescribable and glorious joy' (1:8). *Now (arti)* we do not see him, says 1 Peter. Two critical matters are quite clear in each of these three passages: not seeing is a *temporary* condition characterizing the present age, and the one that we do not see now (but will one day) is specifically *Jesus Christ*, the incarnate Son of God.

To return then to the question posed at the end of the last section: ought Christians desire to see Christ? Though the answer is definitively 'Yes', considered in general, the New Testament witness, I argue, suggests that Christians must view this desire as one that will only be enjoyed in the eschatological future. To seek to see Christ now is to move the eschatological clock ahead of schedule. The Reformed Christian can agree with the Byzantine defense of icons, as described by Jaroslav Pelikan, insofar as it argues that the incarnation has brought in a new order of things (appealing to 2 Cor. 5:17), with striking aesthetic implications.³⁹ Yet, the Reformed Christian may also protest that 2 Corinthians 5 itself, in verse 7, makes important distinctions as to the timing of the outworking of the implications. Now, Christians grasp the new order of things by faith, and thus primarily by hearing. In the eschatological future, Christians will grasp the new order of things by sight. Hence, I propose a new, yet Catholic, rationale for the Reformed prohibition of images of Christ. We do not attempt to make Christ seen in the present because the present is not the time for seeing Christ. That time indeed is coming, but, for now, Reformed Christians enjoy the measure of the participation in Christ that has been granted: the indwelling of the Spirit, life in the church, and word and sacraments.

A potential objection emerges at this point: why is eschatological reserve applied to matters of seeing, such as the making of images, while it is not applied to matters of hearing, such as preaching or theologizing? The answer, based on the argument just developed, is that preaching and theologizing (at least should) base themselves upon the preserved record of God's revelation in scripture, while the creating and using of images do not base themselves upon any specific revelation. They base themselves, at best, upon the general truth that the Son has become incarnate, but not upon the incarnation specifically. Preaching and theologizing would be just as problematic if they based themselves upon the general truth that God had spoken, but scripture itself was unavailable and Christians remained ignorant of any of the content of God's speech.

Implications for the Christian life

Constraints of space do not allow for extensive consideration of the broader implications of this theological examination of the second commandment for the Christian life. I conclude, however, with a couple of brief reflections on how my conclusions relate to a Christian vision of ethics and spirituality more generally.

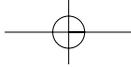
39 Pelikan, *Imago Dei*, pp. 75–7.

First, my conclusions ought to be understood in the context of, and give further definition to, the present inchoate nature of the Christian life. The salvific blessings of Christ already belong to the church, but not yet in consummate measure. This article does not at all mean to minimize or scorn the desires of Christians to look at their Savior. Scripture itself testifies to the longings of God's people throughout history to gaze at their Lord, and the wonder of the eschatological promise is that these longings are wholly legitimate and will indeed be satisfied. The present-day Christian's deprivation of seeing Christ should perhaps be viewed as partially constitutive of the sufferings of this age. The Christian's suffering can be, and often should be, mitigated in part by various measures, but they can never be eliminated. The basic attitude to which Christians are called in the face of such sufferings is that of patient endurance, and to build the virtue of patience can only be regarded as a central aspect of the call to a Christ-shaped life. 1 Peter 1:6–7, considered above, is especially clear that not seeing Christ now is indeed an element of that present suffering that Christians must endure. The attitude of the Christian toward seeing Christ, according to the present treatment, is not one of indifference, but one of hope in the midst of the suffering of not seeing. As Paul says in Romans 8:24–25, in the context of present sufferings and future glory: 'Now hope that is seen is not hope. For who hopes for what he sees? But if we hope for what we do not see, we wait for it patiently.' As with other elements of the Christian life, so with regard to the vision of God, Christians walk by hope and not by sight.

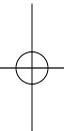
Second, my conclusions reinforce a perspective that has defined Reformed treatments of the second commandment from the outset: Reformed Christian spirituality is word-centered rather than image-centered.⁴⁰ Reformed Christianity has eagerly embraced the New Testament emphasis upon the power of the written and preached word of God for the salvation and edification of sinners. What Reformed discussions of the second commandment have not equally emphasized is that the word-centeredness of Christian spirituality is itself provisional. The present centrality of the preached word – which is received by hearing and responded to by faith – will one day blossom into communication from God that is visual as well as audible, that has form as well as pitch.⁴¹ Even in the present age, as Reformed theologians have reminded their students, God has stooped to satisfy partially the Christian's longing to see as well as to hear by giving the sacraments of baptism and

40 Michalski notes how Calvin turned his discussion of images into an 'apologia for hearing' (*The Reformation*, pp. 64–5). It may be worth noting at this point that Byzantine iconoclasm has been described as word-centered rather than image-centered. See Barber, *Figure and Likeness*, ch. 6.

41 Hence, Reformed Christians might again agree *in general* with the Byzantine position as interpreted by Pelikan, yet disagree about *when* the particular implications come to bear, when they read: 'The ancient priority of hearing in biblical thought, therefore, had now been forced to yield to the priority of seeing, as a consequence of the incarnation.' See Pelikan, *Imago Dei*, p. 99.



the Lord's Supper.⁴² The call to be word-centered is difficult, and is partially mitigated by the sacraments. Nevertheless, having a word-centered spirituality is an upshot of the Reformed understanding of the second commandment, and perhaps future investigation into the character of such a spirituality ought to take account of the matters of incarnation and beatific vision that demand spirituality of just this sort in the present age.



42 For example, see the *Heidelberg Catechism*, QQ. & AA. 66, 75. The relationship of images of Christ with the Eucharist especially is an issue worth much more exploration. The image disputes and the Eucharist disputes of the Reformation era are linked 'by thousands of threads,' as Michalski notes (*The Reformation*, p. 169).

