

## Graven Images: The Iconoclastic Controversy

### *Medieval Church History – Session Eight*

“We ought not to think that the Divine Nature is like gold or silver or stone,  
something shaped by art and man’s devising.”  
—Acts 17:29 NKJV

“If [a picture of Jesus Christ] do not stir up devotion, it is in vain; if it do stir up devotion, it is  
worshipping by an image or picture.”<sup>1</sup>  
—Thomas Vincent (1634-1678)

#### I. Introduction

- a. Yet Another Controversy!
- b. The “Iconoclastic Controversy”

#### II. Origins and Definitions

- a. Icons
  - i. Reasons for Their Increase
    - 1. Teaching the Illiterate
    - 2. Veneration of Saints
    - 3. The Incident of AD 626
  - ii. What Are Icons?
- b. Iconoclasm
  - i. εἰκών (*eikōn*, “ee-KOHN”): “image”
  - ii. κλάω (*klaō*, “KLAH-oh”): “to break”

#### III. The Iconoclastic Controversy

- a. Background
  - i. The Council of Hieria (AD 754)
  - ii. The Two Sides of the Conflict
    - 1. Supporters
    - 2. Detractors
- b. The Second Council of Nicæa (AD 787)
  - i. Its Declaration: “The more frequently they are seen in representational art, the more are those who see them drawn to remember and long for those who serve as models, and to pay these images the tribute of salutation and respectful veneration. [...] Certainly this is not the full adoration [*latría*] in accordance with our faith, which is properly paid only to the divine nature, but it resembles that given to the figure of the honoured and life-giving cross, and also to the holy books of the gospels and to other sacred cult objects. Further, people are drawn to honour these images with the offering of incense and lights, as was piously established by ancient custom. Indeed, the honour paid to an image traverses it, reaching the

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<sup>1</sup> Thomas Vincent, *The Shorter Catechism Explained from Scripture*, Puritan Paperbacks 16 (1674; repr., Edinburgh: The Banner of Truth Trust, 1980), 147. Vincent was a minister in London and the first to write a commentary on the Westminster Shorter Catechism.

model, and he who venerates the image, venerates the person represented in that image.”

ii. Its Anathemas

1. “If anyone does not confess that Christ our God can be represented in his humanity, let him be anathema.”
2. “If anyone does not accept representation in art of evangelical scenes, let him be anathema.”
3. “If anyone does not salute such representations as standing for the Lord and his saints, let him be anathema.”
4. “If anyone rejects any written or unwritten tradition of the church, let him be anathema.”

iii. Its Reception

c. The Aftermath

IV. **Historical Development**

a. The Reformation

b. The Use of Images Today

i. Westminster Standards

1. WLC 108: “The duties requires in the second command are...the disapproving, detesting, opposing, all false worship; and, according to each one’s place and calling, removing it, and all monuments of idolatry.”
2. WLC 109: “The sins forbidden in the second commandment are...the making any representation of God, of all or of any of the three persons, either inwardly in our mind, or outwardly in any kind of image or likeness of any creature whatsoever; all worshiping of it, or God in it or by it...”

ii. The Regulative Principle of Worship

V. **Applications**

- a. We worship the unseen God *spiritually* through Christ by the Spirit.
- b. Beware of the slippery slope of false worship.

*Recommended Resources*

Bray, Gerald. *God Has Spoken: A History of Christian Theology*. Wheaton, IL: Crossway, 2014; pp. 393-398.

Calvin, John. *Institutes of the Christian Religion*. Translated by Robert White. 1541. Reprint, Edinburgh: The Banner of Truth Trust, 2014; pp. 126-129.

Cunningham, William. *Historical Theology*. 2<sup>nd</sup> ed. 2 vols. Edinburgh: T & T Clark, 1863–1864; vol. 1, pp. 359-389.

Schaff, Philip. *History of the Christian Church*. 7 vols. New York, NY: Charles Scribner’s Sons, 1867–1910; vol. 4, pp. 447-465.