

I M A G E S

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Worship is a natural activity; it is worldwide, and there is no nation or tribe known to history that does not worship. However the worship offered differs from place to place, because worship takes its character and its expression from the concept of God that the worshipper has. The way a man worships is a key to the way a man thinks about God. Thus Christian worship is very different from heathen worship with its idols and sacrifices, sometimes even human sacrifices. Christian worship takes its character from the Christian concept of God. For worship is the acknowledgement of God, the honouring of God, the giving worth to God, so that our ideas of God control our ways of worship.

The Bible teaches us that God is an almighty God, controlling every event in His universe; even every movement of the atoms which form the most distant galaxy is within God's knowledge and under His complete control. But more particularly the Bible teaches us that God is an all loving God. "God is love" we read. At this very moment He is acting towards us in love. He loves us and the supreme proof of His love is that He has become our Saviour, to save us from the consequences of our sin, our condemnation which is the result of our rebellion against His will. He Himself bore the condemnation and curse of all who put their trust in Him.

How should we worship and honour such a God, an almighty, all loving Father? How can we most profoundly acknowledge His nature? Well firstly by receiving at His hand what His love is providing. At this time of Christmas we remember that the Son of God became man in order to bring us salvation through forgiveness, which He won for us by His death on Calvary; and now through the gospel forgiveness and reconciliation with God is offered to all. If we ignore this offered salvation which God has provided through His love for us, any other attempt on our part to worship Him in other ways is vain. Our first and most elemental worship is to accept His forgiveness of our sins. Then too we should trust Him in every problem and incident of life, bringing our cares to Him in prayer because He cares for us. By so doing we honour God, we recognize His power and His love by our trust and so declare by our actions that He is a God of loving power. Thus we worship Him. Trust and faith in God must of course show itself in obedience, for disobedience is only another way of saying that we do not believe that God is to be trusted, or that His way and His command is best. We choose our own in preference to His. Thus the Christian concept of God as One who loves and provides requires that our worship should be primarily trust and obedience. Other religions are religions of observances, but Christianity is essentially a religion of trust. But trust and obedience in their turn require on the part of the worshipper a knowledge of God's character in order that we might trust aright, and not superstitiously, and that we might obey God's will, and not our own notions.

A knowledge of God's character comes through His Word and thus the Bible is the underlying rock on which all Christian worship must be based. God is worshipped through His Word. You will understand then why the Bible is so emphatic that God's people are not to worship Him through images and idols. Condemnation of idolatry runs through the Bible from beginning to end. For example, the second of the Ten Commandments says "Thou shalt not make to thyself a graven image, nor the likeness of anything that is in Heaven above or on the earth beneath. ... Thou shalt not bow down to them, nor worship them", and in Deuteronomy 4:15 Moses warns "Take therefore good heed unto yourselves ... lest you corrupt yourselves, and make you a graven image in the form of any figure, the likeness of male or female ... which the Lord thy God hath forbidden thee. For the Lord thy God is a consuming fire, even a jealous God", and in Deuteronomy 16:22 "Neither shalt thou set thee up any image which the Lord thy God hateth".

In spite of these plain words of Scripture and many others similar to them it is wellknown that Roman Catholic churches are full of images. Indeed, every Roman Catholic priest is required to take the following oath: "I most firmly assert that the images of Christ or the mother of God ever virgin, and also of other saints may be had and retained and that due honour and veneration are to be given them." Many Roman Catholic catechisms, for the sake of brevity in printing the ten commandments, omit all reference to this condemnation of the making of images or the bowing down and worshipping them. But it is not only Roman Catholics that need to be on their guard against slipping back into the attitude of the natural heart which delights in using images in worship contrary to the injunction of Scripture. The use of images, such as images of the cross, and of pictures, as objects used in connection with devotion, is found in several denominations. The clear teaching of Scripture ought to be sufficient to banish images and likenesses, whether pictures or crosses or statues, from use in connection with Christian worship; but in addition we may ask 'why is the Scripture so adamant against such material objects as media of worship? In answer, three things may be said: firstly, that pictures and images are inadequate to portray the Divine. This can only be conveyed through His word, with its many sided facets. For example, our Lord Jesus was both God and man, yet a picture of Him can only convey the outward form of His human body. Even so, it is strange how frequently the artist gives a misleading picture. For example, I don't think I have ever seen a picture of Christ without depicting Him with long hair; yet we know from Scripture that He did not wear His hair long, for it was regarded as a disgrace for men to do so.

Secondly, there is another profound reason for the forbidding of images: the temptation to worship the image with Divine honour is well nigh irresistible when it is set up in front of us for our attention, so that we are betrayed into the awful position of worshipping the creature instead of the Creator. There is no doubt that this is done in the Roman Catholic denomination, for example on Good Friday when the priest takes off his shoes, kneels down before an image of Christ's cross and he and all the people adore it. St. Thomas Aquinas, the leading Roman Catholic theologian, says quite explicitly (Summa Theologica Pt.3, question 25) that images of Christ and the cross should be worshipped with the divine honour reserved for God Himself. Again in the Roman Breviary for the 14th September, prayer is offered to the cross, that is, to an image or representation of the cross of Calvary, with the words "O cross, sweet wood, sweet nails, save this present multitude assembled together in thy praise". If this is not giving of divine worship to a creature, there is no such thing as idolatry in the world.

Thirdly, even if we stop short of such divine worship of an image, the use of images in religious worship prevents our spirits from worshipping God truly and acceptably. For, as we have seen, God is above all a loving God, and the true response and worship that we offer such a God is faith and trust; but sacred pictures and sacred statues are dumb and do not speak to us. They do not evoke faith. On the contrary they rivet the mind on the external object and prevent the heart from rising, through the Word of God, to God Himself in faith, trust, love and adoration. This is doubtless one reason why Scripture is so adamant in forbidding the use of likenesses, whether pictures or statues, in our worship. The sentiments evoked by such representations and images fall short of faith and so fall short of truly Christian worship, though the sentiments evoked by such pictures and images are often mistaken by the worshipper for a true Christian response. It is God's Word which elicits the true response of faith, and thus we worship God through His Word. If we wish to decorate our church buildings, it should be with texts from the Scripture. In this connection we need to distinguish between visual teaching aids used in religious education, which are aimed to stimulate and assist the imagination. Their essential feature is that they are transitory and not permanent - we need to distinguish between them and permanent sacred representations used as aids of worship whether they are statues, crosses, or pictures. Such permanent objects,

especially if they are prominent and used as a focus of worship, do not stimulate the imagination so much as stereotype it, preventing it from rising to true knowledge of God. Their use is firmly forbidden in the Bible. We cannot worship God in a way He will accept if we are not willing to obey Him in this. So let us banish such religious images from our churches and homes, but above all let us engrave God's living Word in our heart so that we may worship Him daily through faith and trust.