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Module 5

**Why is the Orthodox veneration of Holy Icons not a violation
of the commandment against graven images?**

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Iconoclasm: Misunderstanding the Incarnation of Christ

Many times throughout history people have voiced strong objections to the veneration of the Holy Icons, often resulting in their destruction. “Iconoclasm,” which means “icon-smashing,” is overtly based on the belief that the Holy Icons are a violation of the Second Commandment against graven images but is actually the result of a deficient understanding of the Incarnation of Christ.

The Second Commandment reads:

Thou shalt not make unto thee any graven image, or any likeness
[of any thing] that [is] in heaven above, or that [is] in the earth beneath,
or that [is] in the water under the earth: Thou shalt not bow down
thyself to them, nor serve them: for I the LORD thy God [am] a jealous
God... (Exodus 20:4-6, KJV).

Illustrations of Saints and scenes from the Scriptures are almost universally permitted in Christian artwork and even children’s books. It is their *veneration* that brings the charge of idolatry and the supposed *worship* of the human persons and angels that are depicted by the images. If one objects to the veneration of the Saints then it follows that one will object to the veneration of icons.

Icons have been part of Christianity from the earliest days, beginning with an icon made by Christ Himself (“Not Made with Hands”) created when He pressed a linen cloth to His face as he

was en route to Golgotha. Tradition tells us that the Apostle Luke painted three portraits of the Theotokos and is often called the first iconographer. Eusebius of Caesarea, author of *Ecclesiastical History* writes in the early fourth century: “I have seen a great many portraits of the Savior, and of Peter and Paul, which have been preserved up to our time.”¹

There were early critics. Clement of Alexandria wrote that “works of art cannot then be sacred and divine.”² Tertullian believed

... if we refuse our homage to statues and frigid images,
the very counterpart of their dead originals, with which hawks,
and mice, and spiders are so well acquainted, does it not merit
praise instead of penalty, that we have rejected what we have
come to see is error?³

To counter objections which were largely based on Old Testament restrictions on graven images, the fathers of the Quinisext Council in Trullo wrote in the year 692:

In order to expose to the sight of all what is perfect,
even with the help of painting, we decide that henceforth
Christ of God must be presented in his human form.⁴

¹ Fr. Jack N. Sparks “No Graven Images: Icons and their Proper Use,” *Antiochian Orthodox Christian Archdiocese* (<http://www.antiochian.org/content/no-graven-image-icons-and-their-proper-use>) <9 July 2015>.

² Clement of Alexandria, *The Stromata*, 7:5.

³ Tertullian, *The Apology*, 12.

⁴ J. Forest, *Praying with Icons* (Maryknoll, NY, Orbis Press, 1997), p. 6.

Nevertheless, iconoclasm reached an apex in the eighth and ninth centuries, largely due to the rise of Islam which forbade all images. An example of Muslim objection to images are the actions of Caliph Iezid II (720-724) who ordered the destruction of all icons in the Christian churches in his realm.⁵

Some Monophysites objected to the veneration of icons and the fifth century Monophysite bishop of Hierapolis forbade icons in his churches.⁶

Here follows a very brief history of the Iconoclastic Controversy: In 725 Emperor Leo III, despite the objections of the Patriarch of Constantinople and the Pope of Rome, ordered the removal of all icons from churches and their destruction. He replaced the icon of Christ over the Bronze Gate of Constantinople with a cross, which resulted in riots.⁷ Some reasons for his actions include the spread of Islam, which appeared to possess a sturdier form of monotheism. To the uninformed, it appeared that Christianity worshiped a pantheon of gods and goddesses whose images were painted on wood. He may have speculated that the recent calamities – earthquakes and military setbacks- suggested a parallel to the calamities experienced by the Israelites when they fell into idolatry.⁸

His son, Constantine V, continued the rampage against the holy icons, arguing they violated the Second Commandment against graven images. He also believed that the Cross, the Bible and the

⁵ “An Overview of the Iconoclastic Controversy,: *The Orthodox Life* (<https://theorthodoxlife.wordpress.com/2012/02/05/an-overview-of-the-iconoclastic-controversy/>) <9 July 2015).

⁶ ibid.

⁷ . Praying with Icons, p. 6.

⁸ T. Dowley, ed., *Introduction to the History of Christianity* (Minneapolis, Fortress Press, 1995), p.256.

Eucharist were holier alternatives to icons.⁹ This first episode of iconoclasm ended in the year 780 when the Empress Irene ended the persecution of the “icon lovers” (“*iconodules*”). The Seventh Ecumenical Council in Nicea was convened in 787 and restored the veneration of the holy images, proclaiming “[It is N]ot the icon that is venerated but the prototype.” However, a second episode of iconoclasm erupted in the ninth century which was ended by the Empress Theodora. The restoration of the icons is celebrated today on the first Sunday of Lent with these words:

The uncircumscribed Word of the Father became circumscribed,
taking flesh from thee, O Mother of God, and He has restored the
sullied image to its ancient glory, filling it with the divine beauty.
This our salvation we confess in deed and word, and we depict it
in the holy icons.¹⁰

Eight hundred years later, the West experienced iconoclastic turmoil as a result of the Protestant Reformation. Reformer John Calvin objected vehemently to the veneration of Saints and their images. He believed that God was so transcendent that He was beyond human comprehension and depiction and was only knowable through the Scriptures.¹¹ He also believed in the doctrine of *Soli deo gloria*, that all glory belongs to God. In his *Institutes of the Christian Religion* he wrote:

⁹ “An Overview of the Iconoclastic Controversy.”

¹⁰ Praying with Icons, p. 9.

¹¹ “Calvin versus the Icon,” *Orthodox-Reformed Bridge* (<http://orthodoxbridge.com/calvin-versus-the-icon/>) <9 July 2015>.

We believe it wrong that God should be represented by a visible appearance, because he himself has forbidden it and it cannot be done without some defacing of his glory.¹²

This view is prevalent among today's children of the Reformation resulting in churches that are "four bare walls and a pulpit," confirming Calvin's legacy that God is not knowable through the created world but only through the Scriptures. Eschewing all things Roman Catholic, today's Protestants, especially Evangelicals, regard icons as blatant idolatry.

In his coverage of the Iconoclast Controversy of the 7th and 8th centuries the editor of a popular volume of church history, *Introduction to the History of Christianity* from Fortress Press, a Lutheran publishing house, gives the Reformation-informed iconoclastic claim that "Most ordinary Christians failed to distinguish between the holy object or holy person and the spiritual reality it stood for. They fell into idolatry" and he compares icons to emperor worship. The author calls the supporters of icons "mostly monks and their uneducated and superstitious followers."¹³

Philip Schaff, the nineteenth century Reformed author of the eight-volume *History of the Christian Church* as well as the editor of the 38- volume series of works by the Church fathers was very critical of the veneration of the Saints, comparing the practice with paganism: He wrote:

¹² John Calvin, *Institutes*, 1.11.12.

¹³ *Introduction to the History of Christianity*, p. 256.

For the great mass of the Christian people came,
in fact, fresh from polytheism, without thorough conversion,
and could not divest themselves of their old notions and
customs at a stroke.¹⁴

A modern Evangelical blogger's criticisms of icons and the veneration of the Saints follows the historical pattern, making the claim that icons violate the Second Commandment. In his article "A Friendly Critique of Eastern Orthodoxy: Three Erroneous Beliefs" the author makes the false claim that "Eastern Orthodoxy teaches the adoration of the saints," commenting that [He is] "against the Glory of God being robbed by anything, including sacred art objects." His greatest objection is that the veneration of the Saints and their icons are not found in the New Testament. As an adherent to the Reformation doctrine of *Sola scriptura*, he states that "as a Bible-believing Protestant I take as my authoritative standard the Bible alone."¹⁵

For the purposes of this essay I would like to examine three particular objections to the veneration of the holy icons and offer Orthodox responses to each. The first objection is that icons violate the Second Commandment against graven images and is therefore idolatry; the second is the claim that one must not petition the Saints at all because there is only One Mediator between man and God and that is Jesus Christ; and the third objection is the claim that icons and their veneration are not found in the Holy Scriptures.

¹⁴ P. Schaff, "The Worship of Martyrs and Saints," *History of the Christian Church Volume III*.

¹⁵ . Jeff Short, "A Friendly Critique of Eastern Orthodoxy: Three Erroneous Beliefs," *Jeff Short's Weblog* <https://jeffshort.wordpress.com/2012/09/19/a-friendly-critique-of-eastern-orthodoxy-three-erroneous-beliefs/> <9 July 2105>.

“The Second Commandment Forbids Images”

An obvious counter-argument to the claim that God forbids the creation of all images can be found in the very book of the Old Testament that contains the Second Commandment wherein He commands the artistic depiction of cherubim:

Moreover you shall make the tabernacle with ten curtains woven of fine linen thread, and blue and purple and scarlet yarn; with artistic designs of cherubim you shall weave them (Exodus 26:1).

This argument did not satisfy John Calvin, however:

Hence it is perfectly clear that those who try to defend images of God and the saints with the example of those cherubim are raving madmen. What, indeed, I beg you, did those paltry little images mean? Solely that images are not suited to represent God’s mysteries.¹⁶

What is meant by “idolatry?” One typically thinks of an idol as a representation of a pagan god such as Dagon (I Samuel 5:2) or Artemis (Acts 19:28). The Merriam-Webster Online Dictionary gives two definitions for the word “idol: “a greatly loved or admired person” and “a picture or object that is worshipped as a god.” These definitions illustrate the contrast between veneration (*doulia*) worship (*latreia*). Veneration means showing love, respect, reverence and honor for a person whereas worship is reserved for God alone. “Veneration is distinct

¹⁶ John Calvin, *Institutes of the Christian Religion*, 1.11.3.

from **worship** (gr. *latreia*), for worship is a total giving over of the self to be united with God, while veneration is showing delight for what **God** has done.¹⁷

Examples of veneration (but *not* worship) from the Old Testament include Abraham bowing to the sons of Hamor; Jacob bowing before his brother Esau, Joshua bowing before an angel of God and Daniel also bowing before an angel. One *venerates* but does not *worship* the persons depicted on the icons.

“There is Only One Mediator”

Another common objection is derived from I Timothy 2:5: “For *there is* one God, and one mediator between God and men, the man Christ Jesus...” Surely, the argument goes, since Christ is the only mediator between God and man there is no need to use icons to communicate with heaven.

The author of a certain blog writes: “We have a direct line through Christ and we should pray through Him and only Him... Using Mary is almost like a medium or idolatry to me.”¹⁸ This demonstrates confusion between the words “mediate” and “intercede.” Christ mediates the New Covenant and as the God Man, He is the bridge between God and man. He is unique in this role; He is the One Mediator. Any Christian can be an intercessor, however, which means to ask

¹⁷ “Veneration,” Orthodox Wiki (<http://orthodoxwiki.org/Veneration>) <9 July 2016>.

¹⁸ “Is Praying to the Saints Biblical?” *Protestant Challenges* (<http://www.angelfire.com/home/protestantchallenges/saints.html>) <9 July 2015>.

another human person to pray on your behalf, as St. Paul does when he urges that “petitions, prayers, intercession and thanksgiving be made for all people... (I Timothy 2:1).

A corollary to this objection is that icons are depictions of *dead people* and even if they were alive do we know they receive our petitions? A poster named “Howie,” in a discussion with a Roman Catholic poster on a popular Reformed discussion forum, demands “show me where the Scripture instructs the church to call upon the dead.”¹⁹

Yet Christ said, "...and everyone who lives and believes in me will never die," and in reference to God speaking from the Burning Bush concerning Abraham, Isaac and Jacob He declared that “He is not God of the dead, but of the living: for all live to Him” (Mark 12:26). The Saints are the “Great Cloud of Witnesses” referred to in the Epistle to the Hebrews (Hebrews 12:1) and are just as much a part of the Holy Orthodox Church now as they were when they walked the earth. In the sixth chapter of the Apocalypse we read of Christian martyrs who are under the altar, crying out “How long, O Lord, holy and true, dost thou not judge and avenge our blood on them that dwell on the earth?” This clearly demonstrates that the Saints are alive and that they are well aware of events taking place on the earth. It is appropriate to depict these heroes of the faith, these friends of Gods, on icons.

¹⁹ Roman Catholicism Subforum, *Christian Apologetics and Research Ministry* (<http://forums.carm.org/vbb/forumdisplay.php?57-Roman-Catholicism>) < 7 July 2015>.

Proof, for those with eyes to see and ears to hears, can be found in the miracles attributed to icons. One example is from the life of St. Herman of Alaska. When Spruce Island was threatened by a tsunami he placed the icon of the Mother of God on the beach and proclaimed that the wave would not pass the icon, and so the island and its inhabitants were saved.²⁰

“It’s not in the Bible”

For those who ascribe to *Sola scriptura*, that foundational doctrine of the Reformers, the very fact that icons and prayers to the Saints are not mentioned in the Scriptures is proof enough that the practice is “a vain tradition of men.” Matt Slick, the author of a large web site promoting evangelical apologetics has this to say about prayers to the Theotokos:

There is nothing in the Bible that says that Mary can simultaneously hear the prayers of people all over the world, in different languages, spoken, and thought, an attribute that God possesses.²¹

To refute this argument one must refute the doctrine of *Sola scriptura*, which is beyond the scope of this essay. However, it can be noted that Church history didn’t end with the last verse of the 28th chapter of Acts and there are numerous examples of the use of icons by the earliest Christians. Archeologists have discovered depictions of martyrs and Saints in the Catacombs of Rome and the church at Dura Europos.

²⁰ Fr. John Reeves, “The Feast of St. Herman of Alaska,” *In the Footsteps of St. Herman* (<http://frjohn.holytrinity-oca.org/2010/08/day-77-the-feast-of-st-herman-of-alaska/>) <9 July 2015>.

²¹ Matt Slick, “Can Mary Hear Our Prayers?” Christian Apologetics and Research Ministry (<https://carm.org/can-mary-hear-our-prayers>) <9 July 2015>.

These are the three common objections to the veneration of the icons. However, all three objections miss the heart of the issue, which is *the Incarnation of Christ and His entry into the physical realm*. All three critiques are based on a faulty understanding of the Incarnation of Christ.

To refute the arguments of the iconoclasts, both ancient and modern, one can do no better than quote St. John of Damascus. Ironically, Saint John was preserved from persecution because he lived at the monastery at Mar Saba, which was located in Muslim territory and out of the reach of the iconoclastic persecutors. St. John's main defense of the icons can be summarized in this way: It would be erroneous to attempt to portray an image of the invisible God since "no man can see God at any time." The Israelites of the Old Testament could not see God and therefore, could not depict Him in works of art. Pagan cultures did portray their gods in statuary but the Israelites were forbidden to do this. However, and this is the crux of the matter, Jesus Christ entered the world as a physical being, someone who could be *seen* with the physical senses. If cameras had existed two thousand years ago, His likeness could have been captured in a photograph. He did not come to mankind as a disembodied spirit but instead came as a real human person with a visible, touchable human body, thereby sanctifying the matter that made up his body. Therefore, St. John argues, it is appropriate to depict His form by means of paint and wood.²² To quote St. John:

²² Praying with Icons, p. 8.

It is obvious that when you contemplate God becoming man,
then you may depict Him clothed in human form. When the invisible
One becomes visible to flesh, you may then draw His likeness.
When He who is bodiless and without form, immeasurable in
the boundlessness of His own nature, existing in the form of
God, empties Himself and takes the form of a servant in substance
and in stature and is found in a body of flesh, then you may draw
His image and show it to anyone willing to gaze upon it.²³

In summary, the greatest objection to the Holy Icons is the erroneous belief that it violates the Second Commandment against graven images. At the time the commandment was given, God was invisible to mankind. After the Incarnation, God the Son became visible and could and should be depicted on icons. Often, the same religious groups that object to icons object to physicality in worship as a general practice, rejecting the sacramental views of Baptism and the Eucharist. Theirs is often a cerebral form of worship centered on a study of the Scriptures which they believe is the only way God speaks to humanity today. Yet Christ, by his Incarnation, has sanctified matter. By His Baptism He sanctified water. He sanctified ordinary bread and wine in the Eucharist. It is entirely proper to venerate His holy image on icons as well as the images of the Saints who have obtained *theosis*, or union, with Him.

²³ Saint John Damascene, *On the Divine Images*, 18.

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