

Lord's Day 35

96. **Q.** *What does God require
in the second commandment?*

A. *We are not to make an image of God in any way,¹
nor to worship Him in any other manner
than He has commanded in His Word.²*

¹ *Deut. 4:15-19; Is. 40:18-25; Acts 17:29; Rom. 1:23.*

² *Lev. 10:1-7; Deut. 12:30; I Sam. 15:22, 23; Matt. 15:9; John 4:23,
24.*

97. **Q.** *May we then not make
any image at all?*

A. *God cannot and may not
be visibly portrayed in any way.
Creatures may be portrayed,
but God forbids us
to make or have any images of them
in order to worship them
or to serve God through them.¹*

¹ *Ex. 34:13, 14, 17; Num. 33:52; II Kings 18:4, 5; Is. 40:25.*

98. **Q.** *But may images not be tolerated
in the churches
as "books for the laity"?*

A. *No, for we should not be wiser than God.
He wants His people to be taught
not by means of dumb images¹
but by the living preaching of His Word.²*

¹ *Jer. 10:8; Hab. 2:18-20.*

² *Rom. 10:14, 15, 17; II Tim. 3:16, 17; II Pet. 1:19.*

LORD'S DAY 35

SECOND COMMANDMENT: THE SPECIAL MANNER OF WORSHIP

Text: Lord's Day 35
Reading: Deuteronomy 30 : 11-20
Ezekiel 18 : 1-20

Psalm 97 : 1, 4
Hymn 47 : 3
Psalm 95 : 1, 2, 3
Psalm 103 : 7
Psalm 105 : 1, 2, 3

Introduction: Beloved congregation of the Lord Jesus Christ,

We come now to the second commandment of the Ten Words. "You shall not make for yourself a graven image . . ." It is clear that what is meant is a *god-image*, an object of worship, for the commandment adds: ". . . you shall not bow down to them or serve them".

For a proper understanding of the second commandment, we must clearly distinguish it from the *first* commandment. You might note that Romanists and Lutherans both see the first and the second commandment as the same, as one commandment, and in order to retain the number of ten, they divide up the tenth commandment into two. Rome feels that the second commandment basically does not add anything new to the first one, for are other gods—idols—not often in the form of graven images?

That is true indeed. Idols are often images, but not always! The point is, however, that the second commandment deals with quite a different matter than the first. The first speaks about *whom* we shall serve, namely the LORD, the only, living God. The second commandment tells us *how* we shall serve the LORD, namely in accordance with His Word!

So we are called to deal with the *manner* in which the LORD, our God, is to be worshipped. Now I know that many people consider this to be a rather secondary point. Why should we argue about the different

ways in which people serve the LORD? The general trend is to think that it does not matter *how* you serve God, but only that you serve God. You may serve God in your *own way*! Similarly, people say, it does not matter *where* you worship, or in what church, as long as you do in fact worship!

So for many people the manner of serving God is not important. But notice how in this commandment this matter is presented as being of great consequence. A severe sanction is included in this commandment: "For I the LORD your God am a jealous God, visiting the iniquity of the fathers upon the children to the third and fourth generation of those who hate me . . ." There is also a great promise here: ". . . but showing steadfast to thousands of those who love Me and keep my commandments". The manner of serving the LORD is so important that it leads either to blessing or curse! For God is special and He wants to be served in a special manner. I summarize this Lord's Day as follows:

The second commandment concerning the special manner in which the only living God wishes to be worshipped.

- 1. the heathen manner of worship**
- 2. the covenantal manner of worship.**

1. In order to understand this commandment, we have to know what is involved in the heathen manner of worship. For it is clear that the heathens conducted

worship through the use of graven images, god-images.

So one of our first questions with respect to this commandment must be: why did the heathen use *images*? Did they not know that these images were dumb and deaf, and that they were calling upon wood or stone, or metals? Well, yes, the heathens also understood quite well that in themselves these images were nothing but lifeless objects. Still, they could not conceive of any worship without these images. All worship of all peoples around Israel was done via the use of these images.

What, then, did the graven image mean? The image meant nothing less than a *representation* of the god which they worshipped. Their gods—who were in themselves perhaps also invisible—were made visible and concrete through such images. And so—the next step is easy to follow—that which initially represented the god, became the god itself! It was given all the honour and worship which the god deserved; if you bowed before the image, you bowed before the god that it represented.

This image, then, came to receive many powers. It acted more or less as a kind of a “transformer”. Divine power—the power of the gods—was contained in it and channelled through it. In this way people could have access to the divine power and even exercise some control over it. The image regulated the “communion” between the gods and the worshippers, and it gave the people a concrete, tangible starting point for their worship. In the heathen way of thinking, there was no religion without images!

Of course, we can understand that it was very dangerous to associate with such powerful images. And therefore the heathens invented elaborate rituals and feasts through which to pacify these gods and make them favourable and gracious.

We have to understand the purpose of the heathen rituals. The ritual has its own power. The ritual itself, the act itself, will pacify the god. This is the formalism of the heathen way of worship. Whether you believe or not is secondary, for the ritual does not depend on

faith, but on accuracy. Just go through the proper motions as described in the book, and that is enough; the ritual is guaranteed to work!

So it was not with Israel's ceremonies. Without faith, these ceremonies are worthless. God said: I do not want your sacrifices, for I do not eat the flesh of bulls and goats (Psalm 50). I want true thanksgiving and real faith. I want your heart, and not some outward formalism! Israel's ceremonies, just like our sacraments, demand faith and heartfelt commitment.

So we can profile the heathen way of worship as one of many images and elaborate ritualism with emphasis on pacifying the gods through your own merit. At bottom it is a religion of *self-salvation*.

And we understand that *behind* the image lies the *imagination* of sinful man. There can be no image without a prior imagination. The mind goes to work before the hands fashion the image. So people first make a mental image which they then proceed to create. The gods are portrayed in *human* categories, or with animal characteristics. In order to portray strength and power, they made a bull calf. In order to portray swiftness and speed, they made lions and leopards. So they give concrete form and shape to a mental caricature of what they perceive “god” to be like. It can never be “God” as He really is, but God as we think He is!

Meanwhile, when the heathens have thus captured their gods in what they consider appropriate images, they can exercise a certain control over their gods. They take their gods along on important missions, for example, to the battle field to fight for them and insure their victory. Did not Israel fall into the same sin when it took the ark of the LORD along to the battle field? The Philistines were very much afraid, saying: now their god is in the camp, and we shall surely lose! In heathen terms, taking the ark to war was a brilliant move. In terms of the covenant, it was a disaster.

This is how the heathen manner of worship is regulated. Worship via images becomes worship of images. Elaborate rituals are necessary for salvation and grace. Human ideas about God determine the whole scene. The real God, as He truly is in Himself, is completely

unknown. People chase after figments of their imagination, falling down before the works of their own hands and the products of their darkened minds.

And it is no wonder that the prophets of Israel fulminate against this kind of false worship, even ridiculing it with holy sarcasm. For it is so utterly pathetic that people think they can control their gods, when their gods should be ruling them! It is so pathetic that people can be caught up in the vicious circle of ritualism, never sure if the gods have been truly pacified or not, living in fear and superstition.

It should be noted here that Israel time and again transgressed this second commandment and began to worship the LORD in a heathen fashion. Already at mount Sinai, remember, they made a golden calf. And later Jeroboam made golden calves at Dan and Bethel. Slowly this led Israel to sin also against the first commandment. For sin against the second commandment always leads to sin against the first.

The early Christian Church was at first very strongly opposed to use of images in the Church. But in the course of time images of Christian saints—beginning with Mary—were introduced and the Christian manner of worship was combined with the heathen manner of worship. People began to worship and kiss their Christian images which were said to have supernatural powers. A tremendous struggle arose over this issue in the Church. By the Middle Ages the use of images was so widespread that the second commandment was left out of the text of the Ten Commandments!

The Reformation, of course, resulted in an opposing trend. Many Protestants stormed the churches and violently removed the images from many churches. This in turn led to reactions from the governments and the Romanist church. The Romanist church itself changed its policy somewhat, explaining that the images were not so much to be adored, but to serve as “books for the laity”. Images were to be seen as visual education aids. And perhaps it is true that the elaborate mural paintings in the huge European cathedrals did contribute some knowledge to those who could not read or write. The situation was not the same then as it is to-

day. Still, this was not the manner which the Lord had determined! Paintings and other images may never replace the preaching!

Does this commandment have its relevance still for us today? The last thing we would dream of is putting images in our church building! True. But it is a very small step from ancient imagery to modern imagery. Also today, there is such a thing as a self-willed, self-designed worship. There is much reaction today against the central position and function of the preaching in worship. Modern churches are experimenting with new liturgical forms to prevent their membership from declining even more than it already has. The images of old may have disappeared, but the ritualism is returning again, also in so-called Reformed churches.

We, too, have our traditions, forms and ceremonies. We need to have them, but we must be careful that they do not become a goal in themselves. We must always be on guard against formalism, against only going through the motions, as if the forms will save us! We must always watch out that we do not form wrong mental images of God. How often and easily don't we fall into this trap? We start to think that God is this way or another, that He does this or that, while in reality, things are quite different. We may even come to think that God is as we are, that we can lead our own life and expect God to acquiesce in it.

The essence of modern heathendom is that it has wrong ideas about God; it has no true picture of Him at all. Modern heathens think that God is like them, and that they can lead their own lives as they please with divine acceptance! Modern idolatry makes God into an action-less, gut-less God, who just allows all kind of sin, a God who only knows love and no jealousy. That's the image given of God by many churches. Or they go to the other extreme, and create a God of wrath who knows of no mercy, a burning fire Who only scorches and offers no warmth. Oh, the false images that men make, also today!

The reason for this distortion is that the *Word of God* has been closed. Human imagination prevails over divine *revelation*. For it is God's self-revelation which

determines the covenantal way of worship. So we come to the second element.

2. For we must come to the question: why does God not want to be worshipped via images? Why does He have such a hatred for this kind of service?

We must answer, in the first place, that the LORD, the living God is unique in Himself. He is *free and sovereign*, which means that He cannot be caught and manipulated in any image. His greatness and glory cannot be placed within an image. Solomon recognized this when he dedicated the mighty temple. He said: "LORD, this temple cannot contain Thee, for Thou art too great"! How much less, then, can an image of wood or stone contain God.

The free and sovereign God of heaven and earth cannot be manipulated and controlled by us. When Israel tried to do so by taking the ark to battle, the LORD promptly let the Philistines capture the ark! And then He proceeded to punish the Philistines for such a bold move! Both Israel and the Philistines had to learn that the LORD cannot be contained and manipulated like the images of men! He is free and sovereign!

Here we must also mention that the LORD is an *exalted* God. He is enthroned high above the earth. From out of heaven He rules all the nations. There is no way that this exalted God can be dragged down to our human atmosphere to be forced to dwell in our makeshift images or to conform to our mental images.

And we may yet add to this the fact that the LORD is *incomparable and invisible*. He Himself has asked: to whom then will you liken me that I should be like Him? God is unique and special, and there is no image which would do Him justice. Also our mental pictures of God fall short and are one-sided and incomplete. God cannot be captured in human categories.

It is true, the LORD often speaks about Himself in human terms, for our sake. He speaks about His eyes, His ears, His hands etc. He can take on a certain "form" even though He is a spiritual Being. But we may not presume to "catch" him in terms of created things. For He remains the Almighty Creator of heaven and earth, incomparable, unique, exalted above every creature!

And yet we have not even come to the most important reason why the Church may not make images of God. The great reason is that God made Himself known to us *in His Word*. We may not drag Him down in whatever images we might make, for He has come down to us in the *intimacy* of the covenant of grace. You see, the line of the Catechism in this Lord's Day is that we must serve God in no other manner than He has commanded *in His Word* and that He wants His people to be taught—not by dumb images—but *by the living preaching of His Word*.

The miracle is that this special, exalted God has intimate fellowship with us in the covenant. We do not have to *make* any image of God, for He has made Himself known to us in His covenant. We do not have to seek God, as the heathens do, and then—because we did not get any from above—come up with some ideas of our own. What did we read in Deuteronomy 30? "For this commandment which I command you this day is not too hard for you, neither is it far off. It is not in heaven that you should say, who will go up for us to heaven and bring it to us that we may hear it and do it. *But the Word is very near you*, in your mouth and in your heart, so that you can do it"

Indeed, this is the heart of the matter. We need not search the heavens to find out what God is like. For He has come to us in His self-revelation. His revelation must govern our imagination. The apostle Paul later quoted this very same text of Deuteronomy in His letter to the Romans. He writes: "Do not say in your heart, who shall ascend into heaven, that is to bring Christ down, or who will descend into the abyss, that is to bring Christ up, but what does it say? The Word is near you, on your lips and in your heart, that is, the word of faith which we preach"! (10:6-8)

We may not make any images because God has given a perfect portrait of Himself in His Word and because only Jesus Christ is the visible image of the invisible God! Therefore covenantal worship always revolves around the Word of God and its preaching. This is how God wants His Church to be taught! The LORD comes to His people intimately and personally,

and He plants love and fear for Him in our hearts so that we confess him truly with our lips!

Where the Word is faithfully preached, there people come to the right praise and worship which is pleasing to God. There all caricature is banned, all false ideas about God are overcome, and the true religion can flourish. By the same token, where the Word is systematically closed and no longer faithfully preached, there ritualism, formalism, and idolatry again become dominant and people make wrong pictures, mental caricatures of God!

That is part of the sanction and promise of this commandment. How I serve the LORD is indeed of great consequence for my children and grandchildren. If I close the Word or let it be closed in the church of which I am a member, it will greatly affect my children. For the deformation which I allowed in my time, or in my personal life, will continue in their lives. And I remain responsible for that continuing deformation.

In this connection we read from the prophecy of Ezekiel. In Ezekiel's time the people loved to quote a proverb: "The fathers have eaten sour grapes, and the children's teeth are set on edge". This seems to counteract the second commandment, for Ezekiel must tell Israel: everyone is responsible for his/her own sins. Why should the children suffer for their fathers' sins?

Yes, the rule is: the soul that sins shall die. It can happen that God-fearing parents, who have really tried to bring up their children in the fear of the Lord, yet see some of them go astray. It is then the children's own responsibility. It can also happen that children whose parents were disobedient and irreligious, do serve the LORD with all their heart. This is the Lord's sovereign and wondrous grace. Grace is not hereditary at all.

Still it remains true, despite this rule, that our upbringing is a very important and often decisive influence. If parents are self-indulgent and permissive, so

will be the children. If parents tend to be sloppy in the Lord's service, so will the children be. If parents are diligent, and do teach their children by enthusiastic example, so will their children be. Yes, there are exceptions here. We should remember the rule of Ezekiel that we may never excuse our own sins by pointing to the sins of our forefathers. Yet the LORD does work in the line of faithful generations. That, too, belongs to the reality of the covenant!

Entire generations were lost because parents did not see their priorities anymore or started to allow deformation in their time. Deformation is like leaven which permeates everything and in the end destroys the Church. It takes only two to four generations for a people to fall back into complete heathendom! And then they try to tell us today that it doesn't matter how you serve the Lord!

There is also a great blessing here. The Lord will show His steadfast love to thousands of those who love Him and keep His commandments. Those who live by the Word will be preserved in the covenant. Those who let the Word work in their lives and who show forth the fruits of faith, may expect the Lord's blessing. There is a promise contained in this commandment. The covenantal way of worship brings great blessing and peace, for children's children in their generations!

If every generation is faithful to the Word of God and serves the Lord according to His Word in the right manner, then the generations will continue to be the people of the Lord.

This second commandment is certainly not less consequential than the first. Only those who worship in the true covenantal way based on the true Word of the living God, based on Jesus Christ, the Word Who became flesh, have lasting peace and an eternal future. AMEN.