



## Crosses are Images Too

In recent years there has been a general relaxation among Protestant churches of the strict construction of biblical teaching. Some denominations have consciously gone in this direction, hoping to attract unbelievers and fence-sitters into the church. Others have simply become lazy about truth as they have more and more emphasized the social aspects of Christianity at the expense of biblical doctrine. In most churches, whatever creeds were once held dearly are today mostly deemed dysfunctional.

For whatever reason, we face a world today, even among so-called "Protestant" denominations, that is quite antagonistic toward those who want to continue the old Protestant teachings and practices. This is certainly true with respect to the use of carved statues and pictures of Christ and biblical characters, and especially of the use of crosses. "You can't be serious," people will say, "you're really against the use of crosses as Christian symbols?" Well, what is the biblical answer? Do crosses somehow escape the requirement of the Second Commandment not to make or use images in the worship of God?

### The second commandment clearly forbids images

As people who claim to hold to the truth and authority of the whole Bible, it is a simple matter of integrity for us not to ignore or violate the 2nd Commandment, which forbids all religious pictures and symbols. And the Commandment does forbid them.

*It says, "You shall not make for yourself a carved image, or any likeness (picture) of anything that is in the heaven above, or on the earth beneath, or in the waters under the earth, you shall not bow down to them, nor serve them..."*

Now there can be no doubt whatsoever that a "cross" made today seeks to be an image of the cross on which Christ died, which was most certainly something "on the earth beneath" the heavens. I say, "seeks to be an image," because we really don't know what the cross on which Christ died looked like, nor do we have any description of it.

The ancient church simply did not use crosses at all until about 400 or 500 A.D., by which time Rome had distorted most biblical teaching. The Protestant Reformation of the 1500s restored much biblical teaching and Reformed and Presbyterian folks removed thousands upon thousands of images and crosses from churches all over Europe. Furthermore, modern "crosses" have religious significance, they *are* intended to help our worship or faith in Christ. Thus they violate the 2nd Commandment's requirement that we not use images or pictures in worshiping or serving God. They also violate John 4:24, in which Christ commands that our worship "**must** be in spirit and in truth."

Romans 1 not only repeats the principle of the 2nd Commandment in the New Testament, it also tells us why many so-called "Protestant" churches today have reverted to using pictures, images and crosses. Paul says in Romans 1 that when people push God out of their minds (Romans 1:21), "*their foolish hearts are darkened*" and "*they become fools*" who "*changed the glory of the incorruptible God into an image made like corruptible man – and birds and four-footed beasts, and creeping things.*" The influx of images into liberal "Protestant" churches over the past 100 years is the direct result of their turning away from the God of the Bible. They have made man the center of their religion, again fulfilling what Paul says in Romans 1:25, "*they worshiped and served the creature more than the Creator who is blessed forever.*"

The situation is just too clear to ignore. God forbids the use of religious images, and modern crosses are indeed religious images. All we have to do is suggest to a pastor of a church that has a cross up front, or a person who is wearing a cross, that it might be wrong, and we will know immediately that we are stepping on someone's religious toes. This shows that the cross is indeed an object of devotion or a tool in their worship of God. Such uses of images are precisely forbidden by the Second Commandment.

### **Biblical worship is spiritual worship**

There are several other biblical teachings that strengthen our understanding of the 2nd Commandment and apply it to our worship. The first of these is that the spiritual nature of God requires spiritual worship, and spiritual worship cannot be carried on through pictures and images.

Jesus said, *"God is a Spirit, and those who worship Him must worship Him in spirit and in truth."*

(John 4:24)

It should be obvious that since a cross is a physical object, it cannot be part of spiritual worship. If crosses did not have religious meaning, just as floors, chairs, benches, communion tables and windows to let in light have no religious significance but are part of the furniture, crosses could be part of the furniture of our homes and churches. But of course that is not at all what crosses are used for. They are used as religious symbols that "create a holy atmosphere" or as religious good luck charms. In both cases they become idols that detract from the pure worship of God *"in spirit and in truth."*

The next biblical principle I wish to address is the "regulative principle of worship." This principle, stated in Deuteronomy 12:32, and repeated by Christ in Mark 7:7, requires that in worship *"what thing soever I command you, observe to do it, you shall not add to it nor subtract from it"* (Deuteronomy 12:32). This means that if something is to be part of our worship, we must be able to find it used, recommended or commanded in the Bible. The Bible, and especially the New Testament, which was written in the forty years after Christ died, never even mentions the use of crosses by Christians for anything, much less as images in churches or as Christian symbols.

This absolute silence on the part of Scripture must be taken as forbidding the use of crosses since using them would be adding to God's commandments about how we are to worship Him, which is exactly what is forbidden by Deuteronomy 12:32 and Mark 7:7.

Those who use crosses and other religious symbols have often said, "you are misunderstanding us, these images have no religious meaning for us." If that is the case, then why use them at all, and why be surprised when someone removes them. The fact is that any image that is associated with worshiping or serving God does have religious significance for those who use it. That is why they are unhappy when someone suggests that they ought not to use them.

We should realize that the pagan nations around Israel used images of their gods, setting them up in their temples. Thus there is plenty of negative teaching about images in the Old Testament that can be helpful to us. I would suggest that those who are interested in learning more about this issue study some of these passages. Examples are:

1. In Exodus 20:23 right after the Ten Commandments, God re-emphasizes one of them, the 2nd Commandment;
2. In Deuteronomy 4:15-19, Moses warns Israel against images, saying, *"you saw no form when God spoke to you at Horeb out of the midst of the fire;"*
3. In Psalm 115:3-8, God not only ridicules images as being blind, deaf and dumb even though they have eyes, ears and mouths (carved or painted on), but He says, *"those who make them are like them;"*
4. Isaiah ridicules the use of images in Isaiah 44:9-20, where he ends by saying, *"a deceived heart has turned him (the image-keeper) aside, And he cannot deliver his soul, nor say, 'Is there not a lie in my right hand?'"* and

5. Habakkuk forbids the use of images as religious teaching aids by saying that they "*teach lies*," "*cannot teach* (spiritual things)," and that they falsely replace God's word as the proper teacher of His people (Habakkuk 2:18-20; see also Heidelberg Question and Answer 98).

## **Conclusion**

The Bible is very clear about the use of pictures and images, either in worship or as religious symbols. They are simply forbidden. At the same time this teaching does not apply to decoration with images that bear no religious significance or symbolism. Thus the Old Testament temple was decorated with flowers, pomegranates and palm leaves carved in stone. In the same way our bulletins often have images of flowers, churches, etc., on them. It needs also to be said that the use of Bible verses or other non-pictorial backdrops on the wall behind a pulpit are not forbidden. Sometimes we pastors do not make the principle of spiritual worship and its forbidding of religious images as clear as we might to our congregations. At the same time, I am confident that all of us know clearly that the RCUS is firmly committed to believing and obeying all of the Bible, and can therefore understand that we would not wish to leave out the Second Commandment.

Robert E Grossmann

© 2014 Copyright by the **Reformed Church in die U.S.** All rights reserved. Reprinted with permission.  
The views expressed are not necessarily those of the editors or official positions of the RCUS.  
[www.christianstudylibrary.org](http://www.christianstudylibrary.org)