

## CALVINISM VERSUS IDOLATRY – by Rev. Professor-Emeritus Francis Nigel Lee

"We know that the Son of God has come, and has given us an understanding so that we may know Him Who is true [*viz.* God the **Father**]; and we [Christians] are...in His **Son** Jesus [*viz.* the **Spirit**-anointed] Christ. **This is the true God** -- and everlasting life! Little children, guard yourselves from the idols!" First John 5:20-21.

It should carefully be noted that the above passage clearly presupposes **the Triune God** is the **only True Deity**. He alone may be worshipped in terms of the First Commandment (in Exodus 20:1-3a). That states: "**God Triune** (*'Eloohiym*) spoke all these words, saying: 'I am the **Lord your Triune God** (*J'hoovaah 'Eloohychaa*) Who has brought you out...of bondage (so that) you shall have no other gods!'"

It should very carefully be noted that the above passage also clearly presupposes that even the one true Triune God must be honoured and worshipped precisely in terms of the Second Commandment (in Exodus 20:4-5a). That states: "You shall **not make** for yourself any engraved image or any likeness of anything that is in heaven above or in the earth beneath or in the waters beneath the earth....

"'You shall not bow down to them [*viz.* to such images]. Nor serve them [*viz.* reverence any man-made depictions of anything in heaven such as God the Father or Jesus or the Holy Spirit or even of blessed God-fearing creatures like the unfallen angels or Mary or Joseph or whomsoever or whatsoever]!"

For the Second Commandment requires that even the one true Triune God alone is to be worshipped -- only in a **Spirit**-ual way. *Viz.*, He is to be worshipped only in **Spirit**, and not even reverently to be represented in an **imag**-inary way through **images** made purportedly even of any of the three Persons of the Triune God. For "God is Spirit, and they that worship Him, **must** worship Him in **Spirit** and in truth" alone! John 4:24 *cf.* First John 5:20-21.

This means no Romish statues **imag**-inarily **imag**-ing the so-called "Holy Family." It further means no allegedly-transubstantiationistic Masses *etc.* And it also certainly means no Eastern-"Orthodox" iconic pictures -- or even Quasi-"Protestant" stained-glass church windows or children's picture-books with a long-haired hippie **imag**-inarily (mis)representing Jesus.

Especially Calvin comments:<sup>3657</sup> "It is said [in First John 5:20] that Christ 'hath given us an understanding' .... He shows us in the teaching of the Gospel of what kind is the true God -- and also enlightens us by His Spirit....

"'This is the true God.' Although the [unitarian] Arians have tried to get round this passage..., we have here a remarkable title to the divinity of Christ.... **The Father** is the origin of life -- but the fountain from which we must draw it, is [**the Son**] Christ [**the Spirit**-anointed One]." *Viz.* the three divine Persons of the One True Triune God.

"'Guard yourselves from idols!' [First John 5:21].... The Apostle not only condemns idolatry -- but commands us to beware of all images [also of a Person of the Triune God]....

"By this, he signifies that the worship of God cannot be kept sound and pure when men begin to desire images.... The Apostle is speaking not only of statues but also of altars -- and comprehends all the instruments of superstitions.... We should be so careful to remain in the spiritual worship of God, as to banish far from us everything that may turn us aside to gross and carnal superstitions!" Anglicans and Evanjeljellyfish -- both, note well!

Calvin adds in his *Institutes*:<sup>3658</sup> "It was a Father (**Epiphanius** in his *Epistle to Jerome*) who said, '**It is a horrid abomination to see in Christian temples a painted image...of Christ** or of any saint!' Nor was this pronounced by the voice of [just] a single individual. But **an Ecclesiastical Council** [the 305 A.D. *Seventh Council of Elvira* at its canon 36] also decreed, '**Let nought that is worshipped, be depicted on walls!**'

"[However,] very far are they [the Renaissance-Age Romanist Church Leaders] from keeping within these boundaries.... They leave not a corner without images....

"Brutish stupidity has overspread the globe, men longing after visible forms of God and so forming deities of wood and stone.... We must hold it as a first principle that as often as any form is assigned to God, His glory is corrupted by an impious lie.

"In the Law, accordingly, after God had claimed the glory of divinity for Himself alone, when He comes to show what kind of worship He approves and rejects -- He immediately adds 'You shall not make unto yourself any graven image or any likeness of anything that is in heaven above!'... Exodus 20:4.

"By these words, He curbs any licentious attempt we might make to represent Him by a visible shape.... God makes no comparison between images as if one were more and another less befitting. He rejects without exception **all** shapes and pictures and other symbols by which the superstitious imagine they can bring Him near to them....

"It is said in the books of Moses (Deuteronomy 4:15), 'Take good heed to yourselves therefore! For you did not see any kind of similitude in the day the Lord spoke to you on Horeb out of the midst of the fire, lest you corrupt yourselves and make yourselves a graven image, the similitude of any figure!'....

"How plainly God declares against all figures!... All longing after such visible shapes, is rebellion against Him....

"It will be sufficient to mention Isaiah [40:18 & 41:7-29 & 45:9 & 46:5]...on this subject.... The majesty of God is defiled by an absurd and indecorous fiction when He Who is incorporeal, is assimilated to corporeal matter; He Who is invisible, to a visible image; He Who is Spirit, to an inanimate object; and He Who fills all space, to a bit of paltry wood or stone or gold....

"'We ought not to think that the Godhead is like unto gold or silver or stone engraved by art and man's device!' (Acts 17:29). Hence it is manifest that whatever statues are set up, or **pictures painted to represent God -- are utterly displeasing to Him** as a kind of **insults to His Majesty**....

"It is to be observed that the thing forbidden is likeness, whether sculptured or otherwise. This disposes of the frivolous precaution taken by the Greek [Eastern-'Orthodox'] Church. They think they do admirably, because they have no sculptured shape of Deity -- while none go greater lengths in the licentious use of pictures! The Lord, however, not only forbids any image of Himself to be erected by a statue, but to be formed by any artists whatever. Because every such image is sinful and insulting to His Majesty....

"Seeing there is one true God Whom the Jew worshipped [past tense!], visible shapes made for the purpose of representing Him are false and wicked fictions.... Augustine (*City of God* IV:9) distinctly declares it is unlawful not only to worship images but to dedicate them....

"In this, he says no more than had long before been decreed by the [A.D. 305] Seventh Elibertine Council. [Varro, himself..., although he was overborne by the perverse custom of so great a city, he had not the least hesitation in both saying and writing that those who have appointed images for the people, have both taken away fear and added error]....

"Let Papists, then, if they have any sense of shame, henceforth desist!... It is well-known what kind of monsters they obtrude upon us as 'divine'....

"What are the **pictures or statues** to which they append the names of 'saints' -- but exhibitions of the most shameless luxury or obscenity? Were any one to dress himself after their model -- he would deserve the pillory! Indeed, brothels exhibit their inmates more chastely and modestly dressed -- than '**churches**' do images intended to represent virgins....

"Paul declares that by the true **preaching** of the Gospel, Christ is portrayed and in a manner crucified before our eyes. Galatians 3:1. Of what use, then, were the erection in churches of so many **crosses** of wood and stone, silver and gold, if this doctrine were faithfully and honestly preached -- viz. Christ died that He might bear our curse upon the tree, that He might expiate our sins by the sacrifice of His body, wash them in His blood and, in short, reconcile us to God the Father? From this one doctrine, the people would learn more than from a thousand crosses of wood and stone!

"Let us here consider whether it is expedient that churches should contain representations of **any** kind -- whether of events, **or** human forms.... Let us remember that for [some] five hundred years during which religion was in a more prosperous condition and a purer doctrine flourished -- [the edifices of] Christian churches were completely free from visible representations....

"It appears to me more unbecoming...to admit **any other** images than those living symbols which the Lord has consecrated by His Own Word. I mean baptism and the Lord's Supper." See the Calvinistic *Heidelberg Catechism*, Q. & A. 97f!

"[The] Second Commandment...consists of two parts [viz. both the making and the use of images in worship]. The former curbs the licentious daring which would subject the incomprehensible God to our sense or represent Him under any visible shape. The latter forbids the worship of images on any religious ground.... Every visible shape of Deity which man devises, is diametrically opposed to the divine nature...

"It is now [viz. A.D. 1536] about nine hundred years since the Council of Constantinople...determined that the images set up in temples were to be thrown down and broken to pieces.... Shortly after, the Council of Nice...decreed that images were to be restored. Which of the two councils shall we acknowledge to be lawful? The latter has usually prevailed and secured a place for images in churches [in the Post-Augustinian Romish Church].

"But Augustine maintained that this could not be done without the greatest danger of idolatry. Epiphanius at a later period [A.D. 400f] speaks much more harshly (*Epistle to John of Jerusalem Against Heresies* Book II). For he says it is **an unspeakable abomination** to see images in a Christian temple." Indeed, **God had to raise up Islam -- to punish idolatry in the Church prior to the Protestant Reformation!** See Revelation 9:20 & 10:8 & 14:6-9.

For as Calvin states in his *Harmony of the Pentateuch*.<sup>3659</sup> "A true image of God is not to be found in all the world.... Hence that His glory is defiled and His truth corrupted by the lie, whenever He is set before our eyes in a visible form....

"There are two parts in the [Second] Commandment -- the first forbids the **erection** of a graven image.... The second prohibits the transferring of the **worship** which God claims for Himself alone, to any of these phantoms.... Therefore, to **devise** any image of God, is in itself impious.... Assuredly, it is a most gross indecency to make God like a stock or a stone.

"Some expound the words, 'You shall not make to yourself a graven image which you may adore' -- as if it were allowable to make a visible image of God, provided it be not adored! But the expositions which follow, will easily refute their error.... As soon as anyone has permitted himself to devise an image of God, he immediately falls into false-worship....

"Idolaters in vain endeavour to elude this...by their foolish cavils.... Amongst the Papists, that trifling distinction is commonly advanced that only *latreia* [or worship] and **not** *douleia* [or service] is prohibited [of the statue or picture concerned]....

"They make a childish endeavour at evasion, when they pay only the honour of service to pictures and statues.... For [even Hindus and other] unbelievers have never been carried away to such an extent of folly, as to adore mere statues or pictures! They have always alleged the same pretext which nowadays is rife in the mouths of the Papists -- viz. that not the image itself was actually worshipped, but that which it represented....

"We must also observe that the transgressors of the Law, are called the enemies and haters of God.... It is sinful to represent God in a visible image.... All those who seek for God in a visible figure, not only decline but actually revolt from the true study of piety....

"The stupid ignorance of the Papists is confuted, who confine this prohibition to the Ancient People [of the Hebrews] -- as of it were now permitted to paint or to sculpture images of God!... **The Spirit declares no less plainly now that we must keep ourselves from idols (First John 5:21)**, than He of old forbade their being made....

"But those who have been taught by God's Law not only that He alone is to be worshipped but that He may not be represented by any visible effigy, are justly accounted covenant-breakers

if they do not confine themselves within these bounds.... They are commanded to worship God **spiritually** [cf. John 4:24] -- and consequently are forbidden to make to themselves likenesses or images whereby they would deface and pollute His glory....

"Let the Papists dispute as they please that images are not to be removed because they are useful for the people's instruction -- but let this be our wisdom, to acquiesce in what **God** has chosen to decree in this matter!... God declares that all are apostates who do not confine themselves to the simplicity of the Law.... Man is the image of God.... But to represent God by any figure...is nothing less than to corrupt His glory, and so to metamorphose [and indeed to transubstantiate] Him.... He admits neither sculptures nor pictures!"

In his *Sermons on Deuteronomy* (27:15 & 29:26) Calvin remarks:<sup>360</sup> "'Cursed be he who makes any idol or any carved image! All this is abomination unto God!'... You know how and after what manner, God will be worshipped by us. Whosoever invents any manner of idolatry, whosoever devises any manner of superstition -- he is making idols. And that is not to serve the living God, but rather to follow their own fancies and imaginations....

"Therefore, they are all accursed.... For when **God is so misshapen in any painting or in any puppet** or in any other piece of wood or stone, that men will there represent His image and say 'That is a resemblance of Him!' -- it is too gross and outrageous a dealing.... We see in Popery how they say, 'Look, yonder is a remembrance of God!' And are they not so brutish that they think there is no Divine Majesty in Heaven -- unless it be represented...[as] an idol?!

"But they which have any taste of what **God** is, and have heard any syllable of His Word where it is said (John 4:24) God is an immortal and infinite Spirit, the Fountain of life -- do know that He has too great injury done unto Him to be represented by a dead thing and by a corruptible creature and to have His Name given unto a puppet!... They therefore which have but a small taste of this doctrine, do abhor the setting up of an idol....

"We must lift up our minds above the world, and know that we may not stick fast here below -- not make any idol or puppet unto Him. For He cannot abide it!... God will not be served nor worshipped after our own manner, but He will have us to walk according to His Word without adding anything thereunto or taking anything from it. So that all the inventions which men have forged, are all one as if they had set up as many idols.... God says, 'Cursed is he who forges idols!'...

"There is no certainty in them that follow not the Law.... None but the children of God can talk of it from knowledge, according as Saint John says in his Canonical Epistle (**First John 5:20**).... It is not for us to be taught by conjectures of men.... God should have so great authority over us...that when He says the word -- we should wholly stick to it, and seek no farther....

"Contrariwise, all they that serve God after their own devotion -- do but imagine and serve gods whom they know not. The Papists say that **the Virgin Mary** is their advocate.... Have they any testimonies thereof? **None!** But they think so....

"It is not without cause that Moses reproves the Jews for following the gods which they did not know.... He says yet further that the idols whom they served, 'had done them no good'....

We see **the Papists**...saying 'Look, we find it good to go to such a **saint!** For there is such a miracle!... When we served '**The Queen of Heaven**' (they say in Jeremiah 44:18), we had our fill of meat and drink -- there was plenty of all manner of good things!'

"Look how Satan blinds these wretches!.... Nevertheless, that which is spoken by the Prophet Isaiah (44:9), I say, shall always be true -- namely that idols have no power to do either good nor evil. For they be nothing. Therefore, let us learn first of all to stick unto the Word whereby God teaches us!"

Time would fail, if we were to tell also of the many pseudo-miraculous powers -- some of them already referred to previously above -- which were attributed to the mechanical applications of many of those relics to the sick. This was done by unscrupulous priests and monks, to an incredulous religious public in the Late-Mediaeval Church -- right down till the Protestant Reformation. It is still being done also by equally-unscrupulous modern **Pentecostalistic Evangelists** -- who with their lucrative trade in holy handkerchiefs and other fetish-like baubles, today prey upon their gullible victims.

Here too, we must again urge with the Apostle (in First John 5:21): "Guard yourselves from **idols!**" Whether crooners and 'musicians' aspiring to become an (if not the) "Australian Idol" (*sic*), or whether American television 'evangelists' with their 'holy handkerchiefs' (*sic*) idolized by their many gullible admirers -- "guard yourselves from **idols!**" First John 5:21.

States the Calvinistic *Westminster Confession of Faith*:<sup>3661</sup> "The acceptable way of worshipping the True God, is instituted by Himself -- and so limited by His Own revealed will, that He may **not** be worshipped according to the **imag-inations** and devices of men...under **any visible representation**...not prescribed in the Holy Scripture. Deuteronomy 12:32; Matthew 15:9; Acts 17:25; Matthew 4:9-10; Deuteronomy 15:1-20; Exodus 20:4-6; Colossians 2:23."

Indeed, as also the *Westminster Larger Catechism* adds:<sup>3662</sup> "The Scriptures manifest that the Son and the Holy Ghost are God equal with the Father, ascribing unto them such names...and **worship** as are **proper to God only....** **First John 5:20[f]** and John 1:1....

"The duties required in the Second Commandment are...the disapproving, detesting and opposing **all false-worship** and, according to each one's place and calling, removing...**all monuments of idolatry**. Acts 17:16-17; Deuteronomy 7:5; Isaiah 30:22.... The sins forbidden in the Second Commandment are all devising..., using, and any wise approving any religious worship not instituted by God Himself; tolerating...the making [of] **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** (Deuteronomy 4:15-16 and Acts 17:29 and Romans 1:21-25)."

3657) J. Calvin: *The Gospel according to St. John and the First Epistle of John*, II:314f.

3658) J. Calvin: *Institutes* Prefatory Address 4 and I;11:1-13 & II:8:17 & IV:9:9.

3659) J. Calvin: *Commentaries on the Four Last Books of Moses Arranged in the Form of a Harmony*, Eerdmans, Grand Rapids, 1948<sup>f</sup> ed., II:108f & 113 & 120-26 & 388.

3660) J. Calvin: *Sermons on Deuteronomy*, Banner of Truth, Edinburgh, 1987 rep., pp. 922 & 926b line 27 to 927b line 28 and 1042b line 34 to 1043a line 30.

3661) *Westminster Confession of Faith*, 21:1.

3662) *Westminster Larger Catechism*, QQ. & AA. 11 & 108-10.