

## Are Christian Icons Idolatrous?

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### Is it wrong to wear a cross necklace?

The basis for this question is an understanding that graven images were forbidden under the Mosaic Law. The prohibition is stated in several passages:

[Ex. 20:4](#) through [Ex. 20:5 \(NKJV\)](#) You shall not make for yourself a carved image—any likeness of *anything* that *is* in heaven above, or that *is* in the earth beneath, or that *is* in the water under the earth; {5} you shall not bow down to them nor serve them. For I, the LORD your God, *am* a jealous God, ...

[Deuteronomy 4:15-19 \(NKJV\)](#) <sup>15</sup>“Take careful heed to yourselves, for you saw no form when the LORD spoke to you at Horeb out of the midst of the fire, <sup>16</sup>lest you act corruptly and make for yourselves a carved image in the form of any figure: the likeness of male or female, <sup>17</sup>the likeness of any animal that *is* on the earth or the likeness of any winged bird that flies in the air, <sup>18</sup>the likeness of anything that creeps on the ground or the likeness of any fish that *is* in the water beneath the earth. <sup>19</sup>And *take heed*, lest you lift your eyes to heaven, and *when* you see the sun, the moon, and the stars, all the host of heaven, you feel driven to worship them and serve them, which the LORD your God has given to all the peoples under the whole heaven as a heritage.

The prohibition was expressly for the purpose of preventing idolatry – the worship of images. The statement in [Deuteronomy 4:15](#) (for you saw no form when the LORD spoke to you at Horeb) necessarily implies that some might be tempted to use an image to represent Jehovah. Since the prohibition included things in heaven (which would include Jehovah), the usage of any image as an aid in the worship of Jehovah was forbidden. This is evident in the history of Aaron and the golden calf. The words of Aaron make it clear that Aaron was attempting to use a familiar form (the calf) as a mechanism to focus the people's worship towards Jehovah. After the calf was made and an altar built before it, Aaron said, “Tomorrow is a feast to the LORD.” The Hebrew translated “LORD” is the Tetragrammaton indicating what is commonly translated “Jehovah”. God's condemnation of this calf worship is evidence that not only was the use of idols forbidden for worshiping other gods (Thou shalt have no other gods before me), but it was also forbidden as a mechanism for the worship of the one true God.

The question then remains to be asked, does a cross symbol fall under this prohibition? While the prohibition in [Exodus 20:4](#) uses the words “anything”, Deuteronomy is a little more verbose and states specifically the prohibition against the “form of any figure”, and continues by listing figures of living things when were commonly worshiped. It also specifies the host of heaven as other things which might be worshiped. From these examples, it is evident that the purpose for the prohibition was not to prevent all carving and metalwork with gold, silver, stone and wood, but is primarily directed towards figures which

would be worshiped.

The symbol of a cross does not fit into the categories listed in [Deuteronomy 4:15](#). Similarly the Ephod which Gideon made ([Judges 8:25-28](#)) as a memorial of the victory that God provided over the Midianites was not something which would ordinarily fall into this category. However, the purpose of the list in Deuteronomy was to provide illustration of the principle and not to provide an exhaustive and inclusive list. The act of making the Ephod was not condemned in scripture as something which was forbidden (i.e. using a symbol as a memorial), but it is clear that the ultimate use of Gideon's Ephod was wrong for it says "all Israel played the harlot with it there" ([Judges 8:27](#)). This story illustrates the tremendous danger involved in the use of even symbols such that "It became a snare to Gideon and to his house".

In a similar manner even the use of a cross symbol has some inherent danger. Some treat the cross symbol as though it should be venerated – not for itself, but because of the sacrifice of Jesus on the cross. However this is simply using an object to receive the honor that is due God – something which is expressly forbidden. Others speak of "placing the life-giving Cross on their church, in their homes, ..." The cross provides nothing. It is the blood of Jesus Christ that provides life. John said ([1 John 5:11](#)) that "He who has the Son has life." When a symbol is used in the place of God, it has become an idol. God has said that his praise should not be given to carved images ([Is 42:8](#)).

One writer on a Christian bulletin board has written, "I went to Brazil and saw a lot of that. People told me they actually believed Jesus was living inside the wooden crosses they were carrying. Therefore they would worship Jesus inside the wooden beams."

While the symbol of the cross is not expressly forbidden by the language of [Exodus 20:4](#), and [Deuteronomy 4:15ff](#), the dangers of potential misuse are clear from history including the story of Gideon's Golden Ephod.

### **What If It Has an Image of Jesus on It?**

The prohibition of [Exodus 20:4](#) is clear when it specifically forbids the making of a carved image. The prohibition is not merely that of making it and bowing down to it (i.e. combined action), but the making of it is itself prohibited – "you shall not make for yourself a carved image ...; you shall not bow down to them ...". An image of Jesus would clearly fall under this prohibition.

### **What About Statues – Weren't They Commanded By God?**

An image of Jesus on the cross is a statue, and some argue that God has commanded statues to be made and therefore the prohibition in [Exodus 20:4](#) does not apply to statues. Passages cited as justification include [Ex. 25:18-20](#) where Moses was directed to make two cherubim of gold overshadowing the mercy seat, and also [1 Chr 28:18-19](#) where David's plan for the temple "by the writing of the hand of the Lord" included the golden cherubim that covered the Ark of the Covenant.

However, the prohibition ([Ex. 20:4](#)) was for the people making images for themselves ("You shall not make for yourself a carved image"), and ([Deut. 4:16](#)), "...lest you act corruptly and make for yourselves a carved image ..." The argument stated above (God commanded it) implies that whatever God commanded for use in the Temple then could be used by all. However, this is simply not true. One example is that of the Holy Anointing Oil in [Exodus 30:22-33](#), where Moses was directed to make an anointing oil by formula for anointing the ark, the tabernacle and its utensils. This was not to be made by anyone else, "Whoever compounds any like it, or whoever puts any of it on an outsider, shall be cut off

from his people”.

Thus the commandment by God to make statues of Cherubim for the Temple does not provide authority for the people doing this for themselves – especially since that was expressly forbidden ([Ex. 20:4](#)). There is no record of the Cherubim that God commanded to be made being ever used as objects of veneration or worship. However the statues that men made “for themselves” were constantly used for idolatrous worship – the very thing that the prohibition was designed to prevent.

### **Can icons be used in worship?**

Some have said that the prohibition of [Ex. 20:4](#) “does not absolutely preclude, however, the notion of an icon, where God is worshiped with the help of a visual aid”<sup>[1]</sup>

God has never allowed himself to be worshiped “through” anything. He has not allowed himself to be worshiped through an image ([Ex 32:4-5](#) – where Aaron presented the golden calf as the gold which brought you out of Egypt – not a different God, for he proclaimed the following day as a feast to Jehovah). The very concept is warned against in [Deut. 4:15](#), “Take careful heed to yourselves, for you saw no form when the LORD spoke to you at Horeb... lest you act corruptly and make for yourselves a carved image ...” Whether the image is a carved image, a molded image, a painting, a mosaic, etc. – the concept is the same – God is not to be represented by artistic works as a aid to worship. To do so would be a “corruption”. Jesus said, [John 4:24](#), “God is Spirit, and those who worship Him must worship in spirit and truth.” Paul said, [Acts 17:29](#), “we ought not to think that the Divine Nature is like gold or silver or stone, something shaped by art and man’s devising.”

To the extent that pictures or drawings (not expressly prohibited by [Ex. 20:4](#) as these were not typical objects of worship) are used as illustrations for Bible stories there is no prohibitions concerning this. However, if pictures are used to attempt a representation of God himself (warned against in [Deut. 4:15-24](#)), or become objects which receive veneration or worship, then they are no different in usage than a carved object (“graven image”) or a statue – this is idolatry. God has nowhere accepted worship through anything or anyone. Peter forbid Cornelius ([Acts 10:25](#)) from worshiping God through him, and Angels forbid this as well ([Rev. 19:10](#)), and emphasize that worship is to be directed to God alone.

Some make the argument that the picture or icon is not itself being worshiped, but that the worship is being directed to God himself. Like a person who kisses the picture of a spouse – the picture is not the object of respect or adoration, but the respect and love is directed at the loved one – the picture just helps us visualize and focus our attention. However, the same argument could be made for those who rallied around Aaron and the golden calf – they weren’t really worshiping the golden calf – they were just using the calf as an object to help them focus on God! This is the very thing that is condemned in [Deut. 4:15](#) where Israel was to “take heed” lest they act “corruptly” in attempting to make an image (for you saw no form when the LORD spoke to you).

### **But Wasn’t Jesus the Express Image of God?**

Some attempt to justify the use of images in worship by arguing that Jesus was the “express image” of the Father ([Hebrews 1:3](#)).<sup>[2]</sup> Further, it is argued that

“Since Jesus was Himself an image or icon; therefore it is permissible to have icons of Him (and by extension, of the saints, who also reflect Him, just as He reflects the Father). This is the basis of images: the Incarnation. Jesus has everything to do with images of God, since He is that, Himself.”<sup>[3]</sup>

Icon means primarily, “a pictorial representation.” Image means “a reproduction or imitation.” These are the meanings when used for the “icons” which some use in worship. Christ did not come as a “pictorial representation” or a “reproduction or imitation” of God. Rather Christ is deity – not a reproduction or imitation. Nowhere is worship to God represented as occurring “through” Christ, but rather worship is rendered to Christ because he “is” deity – not just a representative of deity.

He is “a tangible or visible representation” (another definition of “image”) of the Father. However this does not provide the authority which is suggested. For example, on the basis of this argumentation, the visible expression of God to Moses ([Ex. 33:11](#) And the LORD spake unto Moses face to face, as a man speaketh unto his friend.) would then have justified Moses in using images of the LORD in worship – since he had seen his likeness. A conclusion which is altogether contrary to the Bible and condemned by express commandment.

The weakness of this argument can further be seen in the statement that:

“Once any image is allowed, the hyper-literalist interpretation of the Commandment against ‘graven images’ is no longer held. The Second Commandment is interpreted somewhat differently. Insofar as it condemns idolatry, nothing has changed. But in terms of the absoluteness of image-making, it is applied differently.”[\[4\]](#)

If it is true that once you allow any image, then you can no longer adhere to a literal view of the second commandment – then this is simple acknowledgement that if you do adhere to a literal view of the second commandment (and there is no justification for any other view), then images cannot be allowed in worship!

In an attempt to justify a different “interpretation” of the second commandment, the writer goes on to say:

“Christians do the same with the commandment about the Sabbath. If we were to be hyper-literalist, we would all worship on Saturday ... But Christians how observe the Sabbath on Sunday, as that was when Jesus was resurrected. In other words: it is the same essential principle, but a different application, based on the events in the life of Jesus. The Second Commandment works the same way: since God took on flesh, we now have an image of God which is not a “graven” (idolatrous) image: ... That is no idolatry; it follows from the incarnation.”[\[5\]](#)

In simplified terms, the argument says that in the same way that Christians have changed the Sabbath Commandment, we also are able to change the Second Commandment. This argument is based on multiple misunderstandings. First, there is the concept that man can change the meaning of a commandment of God. Secondly, the statement that Christians observe the Sabbath on Sunday is just plain false. The Sabbath Law Commandment is simply not binding since the Old Law has been taken out of the way (no longer in force). (For more information see the FAQ on [Sabbath Keeping](#))

[Colossians 2:14 \(NKJV\)](#) {14} having wiped out the handwriting of requirements that was against us, which was contrary to us. And He has taken it out of the way, having nailed it to the cross.

[Ephesians 2:15 \(KJV\)](#) Having abolished in his flesh the enmity, even the law of commandments contained in ordinances; for to make in himself of twain one new man, so making peace;

When the Jerusalem Council was convened in order to deal with this question of whether the Law of Moses was binding, (But there rose up certain of the sect of the Pharisees which believed, saying, “That it was needful to circumcise them, and to command them to keep the law of Moses.”) that the decision was reached (based on scripture) that the Law of Moses was not binding on the Gentiles.

Paul stated it very clearly:

([Gal 3:24-25 KJV](#)) Wherefore **the law was our schoolmaster** to bring us unto Christ, that we might be justified by faith. {25} But after that faith is come, **we are no longer under a schoolmaster.**

## Is then the Second Commandment Binding?

God has always condemned idolatry. Although the Mosaic Law is not binding today, the New Testament makes it clear that some of the moral principles of the Mosaic Law are still in effect – not because they are part of the Old Law, but because they are re-iterated in the New Covenant.

[Galatians 5:19-21 \(KJV\)](#) {19} Now the works of the flesh are manifest, which are these; ... {20} **Idolatry**, witchcraft, ... and such like: of the which I tell you before, as I have also told you in time past, that **they which do such things shall not inherit the kingdom of God.**

Since then idolatry is forbidden, the second commandment of the Mosaic Law is a basis for understanding what idolatry is and what is required to avoid it.

## Summary

The principles and examples of the Bible present a uniform picture that God is not to be worshiped through any “person” (including an angel) or “thing”. God is a spirit and those who worship him must worship him in spirit and truth. Any usage of a “thing” to represent God in worship constitutes idolatry. Therefore even things not designed to be used in this manner (e.g. Gideon’s golden ephod) can become idolatrous in usage, and items not expressly forbidden by the second commandment (e.g. mosaics, or pictures, icons, etc.) when used in the place of a “graven image” to perform the same function are therefore by the principle of the second commandment forbidden.

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[1] <http://ic.net/~erasmus/RAZ475.HTM>

[2] Ibid

[3] Ibid

[4] Ibid

[5] Ibid

