

Question: Doesn't one of the Ten Commandments say that you should not make any kind of graven image or any likeness to anything in heaven or on earth? Does this mean that Jesus would oppose works of art like paintings or statues?

Throughout history some have interpreted the second of the Ten Commandments to forbid all works of art, but a careful examination of what the Bible says will not support this view. While the commandment does forbid the making of graven images or idols in the likeness of created things (Exodus 20:4), the next verse explains why: "You shall not bow down to them or worship them" (Exodus 20:5). God was not denouncing works of art. Instead, he was forbidding his people to bow down before and worship anyone or anything except himself. Only he is God.

Moreover, the Lord demonstrated that he was not opposed to works of art when he instructed the Israelites to build a tabernacle to represent his presence among them. The Tabernacle was a moveable tent that was the predecessor of the Temple in Jerusalem. The Lord chose Bezalel, son of Uri, of the tribe of Judah along with other craftsmen and explained: "I have filled him with the Spirit of God, with skill, ability and knowledge in all kinds of crafts--to make artistic designs for work in gold, silver and bronze, to cut and set stones, to work in wood, and to engage in all kinds of craftsmanship" (Exodus 31:2-6). Instructions for the tabernacle included artistic and elaborate architecture, furniture and special clothing for the priests. All these items were to be used by the Israelites in the making of this structure for meeting with and worshipping God.

In addition to the above instructions, God commanded them to make the Ark of the Covenant which was to be placed in the Holy of Holies within the Tabernacle. The Ark was to have "an atonement cover of pure gold" with "two cherubim made of hammered gold" placed at the ends of the cover. God said: "The cherubim are to have their wings spread upward, overshadowing the cover with them. The cherubim are to face each other, looking toward the cover" (Exodus 25:17-20). If God had intended the commandment against graven images to include artwork, he would not have told His people to make these works of art for the Tabernacle.

The problem is not the actual works of art, like paintings and statues, in themselves. The problem occurs when people bow down before these images in acts of worship. On one occasion when the people of Israel complained against God, he sent venomous snakes among them. Realizing their sin, the people appealed to Moses for rescue. God told Moses to make a bronze snake and to put it up on a pole. Then when anyone was bitten by a snake, he could look at the bronze snake and live. The presence of this bronze snake was no problem as long as it was used only as intended. However, many years later it had to be destroyed. We are told that King Hezekiah “broke into pieces the bronze snake Moses had made, for up to that time the Israelites had been burning incense to it. (It was called Nehushtan.)” (2 Kings 18:4; cf. John 3:14-15).

There is nothing more offensive to God than to see humans bowing before and worshipping any created thing. Of the gods of the nations, the Psalmist said: “But their idols are silver and gold, made by the hands of men. They have mouths, but cannot speak, eyes, but they cannot see; they have ears, but cannot hear, noses, but they cannot smell; they have hands, but cannot feel, feet, but they cannot walk; nor can they utter a sound with their throats. Those who make them will be like them, and so will all who trust in them. O house of Israel, trust in the LORD-- he is their help and shield” (Psalm 115:4-9; cf. Romans 1:21-23). In the same way, we must trust in the Lord God and him only.

[Send questions or comments to University Church of Christ, 801 N. 12th, Murray, KY 42071 or phone 270-753-1881. This article is reproduced on the web: www.nchrist.org] 2014/10/24