Congregation of the Lord Jesus Christ,

The First Commandment is about the WHO of worship – we are to God and God alone. The Second Commandment is about the HOW of worship – the right way to worship this God. And the commandment begins with a prohibition against making any image or likeness of God.

And historically speaking, in the time that the Catechism was written, a chief concern was the statues, stained-glass images, and paintings of the three persons of the Trinity that you found in Roman Catholic churches. And the Roman church argued that statues or images or paintings of the three persons of the Godhead were fine, *so long as you did not worship them or use them to worship God*.

* Now, if you have ever seen such statues or images in a Roman church, you will know that people bow down before them, or drop their heads, or pray in front of them. And if that **looks and sounds like worship** to you, well, they argue that what is going on is veneration, not worship. Veneration means to regard with great respect or to revere someone due to their value or greatness. And they argue that veneration of statues or images is not worship.
  + But that is just semantics. It is no different than the child who is accused of slapping a sibling who responds that he didn’t slap, he just pushed their cheek. And similarly, the Scriptures do not distinguish between worship and veneration. What is being done is worship and it is a violation of the Second Commandment.
* But even if we leave aside the matter of worship, the Roman church argued that statues and images are **helpful teachers for those who cannot read** or who do not know much theology. And that is the concern of Answer 98, which says that this too is wrong. Images should not be permitted in the churches as teaching aids for the unlearned.

And so, if you look around, you will not see statues or images in our church. And that is as it should be. And if there is a cross in the church, such as that one over there, or if you wear one on a necklace, it ought to be an *empty* cross; not one with a Christ-figure on it. And that is because Christ is risen; His work on the cross is done. But it is also because of the Second Commandment. And I hope that we are all in agreement with those things.

But what about pictures of Jesus or the Father or the Holy Spirit in children’s books, or on paintings? What about movies or TV shows about the life of Jesus? And where we usually come into contact with this matter is pictures of Jesus. So, is it OK for us to watch a movie with an actor portraying Jesus or to have books or paintings with pictures of Jesus?

* A few months back, I ordered some copies of a new **Children’s Story Bible** that had been highly recommended to me. I have a lot of respect for the author, and I thought they would be good to hand out to parents when they presented their children for baptism. But when they arrived, all the way from Australia, I was surprised and shocked to see that they were full of pictures of Jesus. And so, I wrapped them up and returned them. Was this really necessary?
* And several years ago, we completely changed our **Sunday school curriculum** because the old one had pictures of Jesus in it. But no one is worshipping those pictures, many would argue. And Jesus did have a human nature, they also argue. So, where is the harm? Was it really necessary to change the curriculum?
* And if you have not heard about the popularity of the recent TV series called ‘**The Chosen**,’ which is basically about the life of Jesus, and has powerfully impacted vast numbers of people, then you obviously do not have Facebook. And many argue, how can this be wrong?

So, are pictures of Jesus OK? Should we avoid books or video with images of Jesus? Well, we are going to start with the answer and work backwards. And I do that quite deliberately, because this is not a new question with an uncertain answer. And neither is this a ‘you have your opinion and I have mine’ matter. We are a confessional church, and our confessions are very clear about this matter. Pictures of Jesus are not OK. They are a violation of the Second Commandment. So, let’s consider why this is so under three headings:

1. The first reason that pictures of Jesus are not OK is that the Second Commandment ***forbids*** the making of any images or likenesses of God.
   1. The Second Commandment begins like this: “*You shall not make for yourself a carved image, or 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*.” Then we read, “*You shall not bow down to them or serve them* …” And a common misconception is that what is forbidden in this commandment is making an image *in order* to worship it or use it for worship. That is the argument of Roman Catholic theology – you can’t make an image of God *in order to* worship it. But that is not what is expressed here. If that is what was in view, there is a very common and simple way that the original language would have expressed that. But what we have here is a very simple do not do this thing [AND] do not do this thing. They are two, separate things: first, do not make any image or likeness, and second, do not bow down to them. Both are forbidden.
      1. And I don’t want to get into the explanation of this, today, but just to be clear, **this is not a total ban on making any image or likeness** ***of plants or animals or sunsets***, etc. What is in view with those images or likenesses *is when it is done* *to represent God*. That is forbidden. So, you may keep taking photos and painting pictures!
      2. But the first part of this commandment is a total ban on making *any* image or likeness or representation of God.
         1. Listen to God’s own commentary on this commandment in **Deuteronomy 4:15-16**. He had just appeared to the people at Mt. Horeb in the fiery cloud, and He said, “*Therefore watch yourselves very carefully. Since you saw no form on the day that the LORD spoke to you at Horeb out of the midst of the fire,* *beware lest you act corruptly by making a carved image for yourselves, in the form of any figure, the likeness of male or female*.” In short, do not make any image of me.
         2. And we can add to this outright ban the fact that it is **simply not possible to make a correct image or likeness of God**. For God is a spirit. He does not have a physical form. In **Isaiah 40:18**, we read this of God: “*To whom then will you liken God, or what likeness compare with Him?*” And in **Acts 17:29**, Paul said, “*We ought not to think that the divine being is like gold or silver or stone, an image formed by the art and imagination of man*.” **Romans 1:20** describes the attributes of God as “*invisible attributes*.” **1 John 4:12** and **John 1:18** both say, “*No one has ever seen God*.” And in **Exodus 33:20**, God Himself said to Moses, “*You cannot see my face, for man shall not see me and live*.”
      3. So, the command of God is do not make any image or likeness or representation of me.
         1. It is why Answer 96 says that God’s will for us in the Second Commandment is “that we in no way make any image of God.”
         2. And it is why Answer 97 has two parts: The first is the blanket statement that “God cannot and may not be visibly portrayed in any way.”
         3. So, the second commandment forbids us from making any image or likeness or representation of God.
   2. So, here is our **opening application question**: Is Jesus God? And I take it that the answer of all of you will be: Yes, Jesus is *truly* and *fully* God. And this should settle the matter all by itself: May we make a picture of God? No. Is Jesus God? Yes. So, may we make a picture of Jesus? No. It should be that simple.
2. But if you have ever thought about this matter yourself or been part of a discussion on it, you know what comes next: But **Jesus also had a human nature**. He was seen by many. If one of the disciples had had a smartphone, they could have taken photos or videos of Jesus because He was a real flesh and blood person. So, the first attempt to justify pictures of Jesus is that He had a human nature.
   1. Well, before we get into the theological part of our response, a simple response to this objection is this newsflash: **Guess what? The disciples *did not* have smartphones**. And all joking aside, if God had wanted us to know His Son or to learn about and from Him, by video, He would surely have sent Him now. But He did not! And we will see why in a moment.
   2. But in terms of a biblical and theological explanation, as I mentioned a moment ago, the common justification for pictures of Jesus today is that when Jesus was on earth, He had a human nature and people saw Him. Well, in **Genesis 18**, we read about the time that the LORD appeared to Abraham by the oaks of Mamre. And by LORD is meant the second person of the Trinity. So, this was a visible appearing of Christ, in the form of a man. And Abraham *saw* Him. He even washed His feet and ate food with Him. And if he had had a camera, he could have taken a photo!
      1. Can you see where we are going here with this? Using the argument from today, then the people of Israel should have been allowed to make an image of this pre-incarnate Christ, because their ancestor, Abraham, had seen a visible, human form of Him. But what did we read earlier in Deuteronomy 4? “*Beware lest you act corruptly by making a carved image for yourselves, in the form of any figure, the likeness of male or female*.” So, although Christ had been on the earth in a visible form, and was seen by Abraham, God did not say, You can make an image of the person who Abraham saw, but no *others*. No. He said, *No* images. And the same is true for us.
   3. Now, it goes without saying that it would have been a blessing to have been one of those thousands of men and women who saw Jesus with their own eyes when He was on earth. But have you considered that apart from the fact that we do not have any pictures or video of Christ, **the Holy Spirit has not even provided us with a physical description of Him in Scripture**! We have pages and pages about what He said and did, but we do not have a single word about what He looked like. The closest we come to any sort of physical description is Isaiah 53:2-3, which says, “*He had no form or majesty that we should look at Him, and no beauty that we should desire Him*.” But that’s basically a non-description, isn’t it. It just tells us what He did not look like.
      1. What this means then is that **we simply do not know what Jesus looked like**. Therefore, any picture of Him is a product of the artist’s imagination. But it is not the truth. It is not accurate. It is not who Jesus was and is.
      2. Also, it is clear from this that we are to focus on what He did and said, not what He looked like.
      3. In addition, one of the great heresies of the early church was to **separate Jesus’ human nature from His divine nature**. And I can assure you that those who paint pictures of Jesus or make movies of Him or put His picture in children’s story Bibles are not wanting us to think that He was *just* human. They want us to see Him as man and God. And I am fairly certain that if I were to put a picture of Jesus in front of you and invite you to stab it with a dart or to draw a moustache on Him or some googly ears, like we sometimes do with pictures of other humans, you would decline to do so. Why? Now, whether we should do that with pictures of other humans is something we can argue later, but I trust you get the point. Jesus was not just human; He is God in the flesh.
      4. And further to this, in **John 16:7**, Jesus said to the disciples, “*I tell you the truth: it is to your advantage that I go away, for if I do not go away, the Helper will not come to you. But if I go, I will send Him to you*.” The disciples loved having the flesh and blood Jesus that they could see and be with around. They could not bare the thought of Him leaving. But He said it was to their advantage. The time of Him being on earth and being able to be seen was over. From then on, He would be seen by faith, by the power of the Holy Spirit, and through the preaching of the Word. And eventually, the disciples came to understand and appreciate this. It is what Paul meant, for example, when he said in **2 Corinthians 5:16**, “*Even though we once regarded Christ according to the flesh, we regard Him thus no longer*.”
3. And this is where we head into the second attempted justification for pictures of Jesus, which is that **surely they are OK if it is just for teaching, not for worship**. And this is our final point.
   1. Have you ever heard a sermon and thought to yourself, that was more like a lecture than a sermon? I have and I dare say I have preached some as well. And have you ever heard people talk about dry orthodoxy? It means heavy on doctrinal correctness but no life or joy or putting it into practice! Do you know what I am describing? Well, they are legitimate concerns. Christian teaching should never be just about facts and information and ‘head knowledge.’ It should also be about worship. As one commentator put it: “Shouldn’t all learning of Christ lead to the worship of Christ?” And the answer is, of course, it most certainly should! Another commentator put it like this: “A picture of Christ, if it [would serve] any useful purpose, must evoke some thought or feeling respecting Him and, in view of [who] He is, this thought or feeling will be worshipful.” And this is the problem with those who try and argue that pictures of Jesus are just for teaching, not worship. We are supposed to worship the Jesus we learn about. We should want our children to worship the Jesus they learn about.
      1. And specifically for you parents, in relation to children’s story Bibles with pictures of Jesus, I believe that what this commentator said is helpful:

*Pictures of Jesus affect our children. Showing our children a representation of Jesus will shape and mould their impression of Him. Children’s Bibles and Sunday School materials often portray Jesus in cartoon form. The effect: Jesus’ majesty, glory, power, and splendour are removed in the child’s mind. Rather than helping them understand who Jesus is, these pictures form a cheaper, weaker impression of our Saviour. Again, this impression will be carried along in worship, even only in their minds. They will worship an impression of Christ not given by God, but created by a cartoonist. Jesus can never be drawn so faithfully as it represents Him as He truly is: fully God and fully man. No matter how gifted the artist, he [or she] will always fall short.*

* + 1. But further to this, the reality is that when we see a scene on TV, or a picture in a story Bible, about Jesus walking on water, or Jesus blessing the children, or Jesus on the cross, and we later read that passage or hear it preached, that image will surely come to mind. And that will be the Jesus we are worshipping.
  1. And in relation to this point, I want to draw us to a close with the words of Jesus that we read earlier in John’s Gospel. For they are both particularly relevant and powerfully instructive. The disciple, Thomas, had refused to believe that Jesus was risen until he saw Him with His own eyes. Well, Jesus, graciously, allowed Thomas to see Him. But He said to Thomas, “*Have you believed because you have seen me? Blessed are those who have not seen and yet have believed*.” And then John, by the inspiration of the Holy Spirit, added these words: “*Now Jesus did many other signs in the presence of the disciples, which are not written in this book; but these are written so that you may believe that Jesus is the Christ, the Son of God, and that by believing you may have life in His name*.” And echoing this thought, **Romans 10:17** says, “*Faith comes from hearing, and hearing through the word of Christ*.” But listening to those who argue for shows like ‘The Chosen,’ and for pictures of Christ in books, you would think that Jesus and John and Paul did not know what they were talking about! That it *is* better to see, and that the preaching of Christ *from the Bible* is not enough. What *utter* blasphemy!

We have been given things for our eyes – they are called baptism and the Lord’s Supper. They help us to see and feel the gospel. And one day we will see Jesus, face to face. But until then, God is the one who chooses how His people will come to know Him and draw near to Him. And that is by the *reading* and *preaching* of His word.

So, may we gladly receive the blessing of Christ that He promises to all those who do not see and yet believe, and may we be those who are happily content with what is written in this book and preached and taught concerning Christ. Amen?