

Discussed: the Second Commandment, Roman symbols, war of images, Christ Pantocrator, iconoclasts, First Council of Nicea, Roman and Eastern Orthodox Catholics. *Jesus of the People*

Picturing Christ: Incarnation and Iconography

By Cynthia Westerbeck

As Seventh-day Adventists, we are familiar with the general Protestant fear that religious art is idolatrous or, perhaps worse, Catholic. The rejection of iconography was historically used by Protestants as a clear visual way to distinguish themselves from Catholics during the Protestant Reformation. We are also familiar with the utilitarian objections to art that shaped the aesthetic sensibilities of our nineteenth-century founders.

John Ruskin succinctly captured this attitude toward art when he declared, “the entire validity of art depends upon its being either full of truth, or full of use.”¹ As inheritors of this utilitarian principle, church decorating committees frequently struggle to justify the purchase of any work of art—whether painting, sculpture, banner, or stained glass—to congregations that insist the money could be put to better use.

Rarely, however, do Adventist decorating committees confront the objec-

tion that such works of art violate the Second Commandment, which declares:

You shall not make for yourself any carved image [graven image, idol], 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; you shall not bow down to them nor serve them. For I, the Lord your God, am a jealous God... (Exod. 20:4–5 NKJV)



We are unambiguous in our reading of the other commandments—keep the Sabbath, honor your parents, don't kill, don't commit adultery, don't steal, don't lie—but we ignore the Second Commandment, or at least interpret it very loosely. Even Ellen White dismissed the prohibition against pictures in her discussion of this command:

The second commandment prohibits image worship; but God himself employed pictures and symbols to represent to His prophets lessons which He would have them give to the people and which could thus be better understood than if given in any other way. He appealed to the understanding through the sense of sight.²

The theological debate over this troubling command has tended to focus on whether creating an image of Christ is the same as worshiping it. But the commandment clearly says, don't make any carved images. Period. That is why both the Jewish and Muslim faiths prohibit representational art.

So how did the early Christian Church come to value images of Christ and Mary, especially given that it grew out of a Jewish tradition that interpreted literally the prohibition against images in the Second Commandment? The progression from symbols scrawled on the walls of catacombs to elaborate icons decorating the walls and ceilings of cathedrals became a battle not over money, but over the very nature of Christ. If we understand the early debate over the role of art, perhaps the discussions about art in our own churches can take on a new theological dimension that transcends our utilitarian roots.

From Catacomb Encryption to "Emperor Mystic"

The history of how first-century Christians came to disregard the Second Commandment remains vague, but it does seem certain that the early Christians were influenced both by a Jewish culture that rejected representational art and a Roman culture that celebrated artistic realism. Jewish artists employed in Roman workshops would have been familiar with Roman symbols. When these Jews converted to Christianity they continued to paint what they knew, but they gave the Roman symbols new Christian meanings.

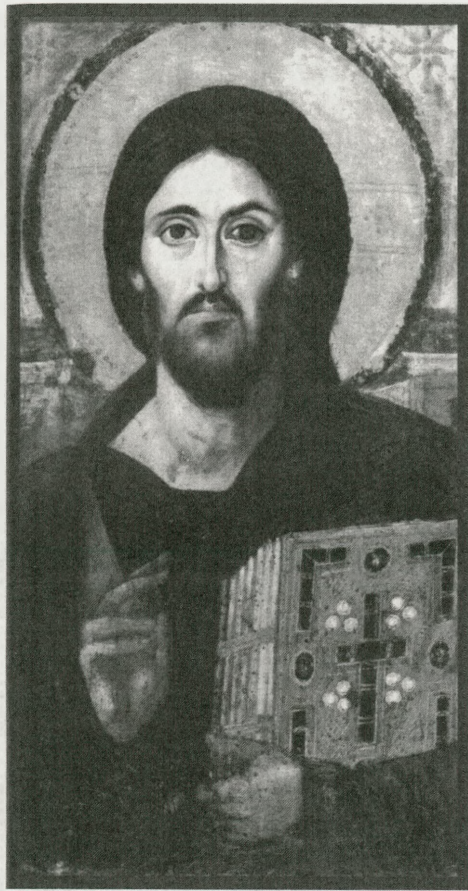
A grapevine, once the symbol of Bacchus, easily

translated into Christ as the vine. A fish became the ichthus, an acronym for the name of Christ as well as the symbol of Christ as "fisher of men." Even the pagan god Eros could come to represent the love of God through Jesus Christ, or the figure of Hermes carrying a lamb could become Christ the Good Shepherd.³ These symbols, so easily mistaken as Roman images, were used as a private code among believers during times of persecution. The one symbol notably absent was that of the cross, which was not a particularly popular image during a time of Roman rule.

By the time Christianity was recognized as an official church in 313 with the Edict of Milan, Christians had a fully developed set of symbols that reminded them of Christ's life and teachings. As Thomas Mathews says, "the lanky Good Shepherd of Early Christian art wrestled with the muscular Hercules and won."⁴ Mathews goes on to argue that the fourth century "ushered in a war of images" as the Christian Church suddenly found itself in charge of an entire empire and needing a new style of art to match its new status. As Mathews states,

Because the impoverished art of the catacombs and cemeteries was inadequate to express the grand claims the Christians were making for their god, they now appropriated the grandest imagery they could lay hands on, namely that which had been developed in the service of imperial propaganda. Finding themselves with an emperor of their own faith, Christians boldly appropriated for their own religious purposes the entire vocabulary of imperial art, transforming motifs and compositions that had been used for imperial propaganda into propaganda for Christ.⁵

The image of the emperor carried huge power for the Romans; it could even stand in for the emperor himself in a court of law.⁶ Christian emperors simply assumed this tradition, but added to their secular power the significance of their semi-divine status. And since it was important to emphasize Christ's role as the true power behind the throne, it wasn't long before icons of Christ in majesty replaced earlier images of the secular Roman rulers in the hearts and minds of the people. Images of Mary enthroned also lifted Mary above her humble origins, clothed her in rich robes, placed her on a throne, and made her a mother figure worthy of raising an emperor.



This icon of Jesus Christ of Mount Sinai, from Saint Katherine's Monastery on Mount Sinai, depicts Jesus Christ with two different looks on his face: One is of a loving man, and the other of a fearful judge.

finger and middle finger was meant to reinforce the dual nature of Christ.

Although these icons appear to our modern sensibilities to be highly stylized and stiff, each element was intended to glorify not the artist, but instead the divine majesty of Christ. Rather than apply techniques used by Roman artists to emphasize realism, painters of icons consciously eliminated the natural use of shadow and linear perspective in order to draw the viewer away from the earthly dimension and into the divine. The following description can be applied to almost any icon of Christ Pantocrator:

All attention is drawn to the sometimes enormous eyes fixed on the beholder, set off by the arch of the eyebrows, and by the point between them where the Spirit seems to be concentrated. The forehead is high and bulging, the seat of wisdom

The most popular of these icons was Christ Pantocrator, which means in the Greek, "Ruler of All." These images were intended to emphasize the divine majesty of Christ, while at the same time reinforcing the fact that he had "become flesh" and taken on a human nature that could be represented through art. Even the traditional gesture of the bent fore-

and intelligence. The nose is long, thin, severe, noble; the nostrils quiver... The very thin mouth is always closed, because in the world of glory all is vision and silence... Light casts no shadows... The perspective is generally reversed... Through the icon the truths of faith radiate toward the person contemplating it. The vanishing point thus moves toward him... Gold is not a color. It is brilliance, active light... Light is not given the task of creating an illusion. It radiates from the image itself toward the beholder. The bodies on the icon do not bathe in a light whose source is external to them. They bear their own light, which wells up from within them.⁷

The icon was seen as more than just art or a representation—it was a means to salvation. As a kind of window to a world of transcendence, the icon attempted to move the viewer beyond human dimensions and into the divine. Worshipers quickly began to ascribe miraculous powers to these icons. People were healed and battles were won all in the name of the icons. Some priests even scraped the paint off of icons into drink as a kind of powerful medicine.⁸

There was clearly some discomfort within the early church with the kind of power associated with these icons. Bishop Eusebius, for example, chastised the sister of Constantine for requesting an icon. But when a woman "brought him an icon of Paul and Christ clad as philosophers, he did not destroy the work but confiscated it and kept it in his own house to prevent its improper use by women."⁹ In the early eighth century there was clearly still confusion about the difference between pagan idol worship and Christian icons. John of Damascus, a great advocate of icons, argued:

If you speak of pagan abuses, these abuses do not make our veneration of images loathsome. Blame the pagans, who make images (*eikones*) into gods! Just because the pagans use them in a foul way, that is no reason to object to our pious practice... Pagans make images of demons which they address as gods, but we make images of God incarnate and of his servants and friends, and with them we drive away the demonic hosts.¹⁰



In other words, it was acceptable to venerate an image as long as it was an image of the true God. In contrast to an idol or *eidōlon*, which in the Greek meant “a false representation of what does not exist,” an *eikōn* was “the truthful representation of an existing thing.”¹¹

The debate over icons, however, soon turned away from the issue of idolatry and became instead a much more significant theological debate over the very nature of Christ’s incarnation. This battle over icons dominated the next two centuries of church history and would eventually play a significant role in the schism between the Roman Catholic and Eastern Orthodox Churches.

The Iconoclastic Debate

In 717, Leo III became the Byzantine emperor following a successful defense of Constantinople against an Arab siege.¹² In 726, Leo banned the public display of icons. To set an example, he removed the image of Christ from the Chalke Gate and had it replaced with a simple cross along with the inscription, “The Lord does not allow a portrait of Christ to be drawn without voice, deprived of breath, made of earthly matter, which is despised by Scripture. Therefore, Leo, with his son the new Constantine, engraved on the gates of the kings the blessed prototype of the cross, the glory of the faithful.”¹³ Thus began the first period of persecution against all those who created or worshiped icons.

There are many theories as to why this emperor was suddenly so concerned with the issue of icons. Perhaps he had a sincere theological conviction. Perhaps he wanted to curb the increasing power and wealth of the monastic communities that had turned the creation of icons into a thriving business. The most intriguing theory is that perhaps Leo had noted the irony that the Islamic forces, who were becoming an increasingly dangerous threat to the Christian empire, kept the Second Commandment better than the Christians by absolutely forbidding representational art.

Many scholars speculate that the emperor came to believe that Christians were being punished for their idolatry and would continue to lose in battle to Islamic forces until the church was cleansed of its idolatry. Certainly it is true that the army became fiercely iconoclastic during this period, perhaps because of its desire for victory—combined with its close encounter with Islamic ideas during its military campaigns.

In 741, Leo’s son, Constantine V, took the throne and



The image above, which appears on the altar of Sacred Heart Church in Skiatook, Oklahoma, combines traditional Byzantine iconography with Osage tribal designs. Christ is shown in the costume of a nineteenth-century Osage chief. He wears a crown made of beaver skin, and he carries an eagle fan. He displays his heart, symbol of his blazing love for humankind. Glorified wounds in his hands, feet, and heart testify to his redemptive suffering and resurrection.

intensified the persecution of those who created or worshiped icons. During this time Constantine worked to clarify the theological objection to icons. Instead of arguing the question of whether veneration is the same as worship, the debate turned to the question of the nature of Christ. Mary

Alice Talbot describes the debate as follows:

Iconoclasts, attacking image veneration as an idolatrous practice, claimed that Christ, as divine, could not be circumscribed. If one did depict Him in His human aspect, then he was guilty of separating His two natures. The iconodules argued, on the other hand, that the New Testament, with its teaching of the incarnation of Christ, superseded the prohibition of images in the Old Testament...since God was made flesh, He could be depicted. If the iconoclasts claimed that Christ could not be circumscribed, they were denying His humanity.¹⁴

This argument was a continuation of the debate over the nature of Christ that had been the primary subject of the first church councils, especially the First Council of Nicea. At that council the nature of the Trinity had been created as a kind of compromise between the Arians, who didn't believe that Christ was divine, and the followers of Athanasius, who argued that Christ (as one with God) was wholly divine and therefore could not be human. Added to this mix were the Gnostics who believed that God could not take on a material body because all matter is evil, and the even more extreme followers of Docetism, who argued that Christ had been "pure spirit" housed in only a phantom body.

The one thing they all agreed on was that you could not transcribe the divine nature of God in artistic form. The question was, could you transcribe Christ's human form without denying his divinity? In 754, a church council was held at Hieria that formalized the prohibition against icons, arguing against the notion that Christ's human nature could be depicted in isolation from his divine nature:

We decree unanimously in the name of the Holy... Trinity that there shall be rejected and removed and cursed out of the Christian church every likeness which is made out of any material whatever by the evil art of painters. Anyone who presumes from now on to manufacture an icon, or to worship it, or set it up in a church or in a private house, or possesses it in secret...he shall be deposed.¹⁵

It is important to note that these church leaders did not outlaw art altogether—and certainly showed no discomfort with continuing to create images of themselves. In fact, during this iconoclastic period images of Christ

were removed from coins and replaced by images of the emperor.¹⁶ Also, as icons in churches were destroyed, they were replaced by elaborate natural designs (grapevines, foliage, images of birds and animals).

Clearly, this was not a debate over either the allocation of money or over the prohibition against images in the Second Commandment. It was instead a continuation of the debate over the divinity of Christ that had dominated all of the church councils since the First Council at Nicea in A.D. 325.

In 775, Constantine's son, Leo IV, became emperor and somewhat relaxed the prohibition against icons, yet even he was distressed to discover that his wife, Irene, kept secret icons. In 780, Leo IV died, leaving Irene to serve as regent for her nine-year-old son. In 786, she used her authority to call an ecumenical council to reverse the iconoclastic ruling of 754, but the meeting was disrupted by iconoclastic soldiers. Not easily discouraged, Irene sent the army off on a campaign to Asia and convened the Seventh Ecumenical Council, the second to be held in Nicea. The practice of venerating images was restored, using as the primary justification the dual nature of Christ:

The name "Christ" is indicative of both divinity and humanity—the two perfect natures of the Saviour. Christians have been taught to portray this image in accordance with His visible nature, not according to the one in which He was invisible; for the latter is uncircumscribable and we know from the Gospel that no man hath seen God at any time. When, therefore, Christ is portrayed according to His human nature it is obvious that the Christians, as Truth has shown, acknowledge the visible image to communicate with the archetype in name only, and not in nature; whereas these senseless people [the Iconoclasts] say there is no distinction between image and prototype and ascribe an identity of nature to entities that are of different natures. Who will not make fun of their ignorance?¹⁷

This respite for iconodules did not last long. In 813, Leo V seized the throne and again forbade the veneration of icons, removing the image of Christ once more from the Chalke Gate. In 815, Leo called for a church council to reinstate the iconoclastic findings of



the council of 754. But the energy for the iconoclastic movement was fading quickly.

In 829, Theophilus took the throne and reinforced iconoclastic policies, but his own wife, stepmother, and daughters continued to worship icons in secret. Theophilus died in 842, following a defeat by the Arabs at Amorion—and along with him died what remained of the iconoclastic movement. Theodora circulated a rumor that her husband embraced icon worship on his deathbed, then reestablished the veneration of icons while acting as regent for her young son.

In 843, the Council of Constantinople was convened to formally reestablish the veneration of images:

We define with all accuracy and care that the venerable and holy icons be set up like the form of the venerable and life-giving Cross, inasmuch as matter consisting of colours and of small stones and of other material is appropriate in the holy church of God, on sacred vessels and on vestments, on walls, on panels, in houses and on roads....For the more frequently they are seen by means of painted representation the more those who behold them are aroused to remember and to desire the prototypes and to give them greeting and worship-of-honour, but not the true worship of our faith which befits only the Divine Nature.¹⁸

Although the specific style and use of icons would become a significant distinction between the Roman and Eastern Orthodox branches of the Catholic Church, this council brought an end to the formal theological debate over the veneration of icons.

From “Christ Pantocrator” to “Millennium Christ”

The debate over icons would, of course, surface again during the Reformation as Protestants pointed to icons as a major symbol of the corruption of Catholicism. But images of Christ—whether in stained glass, sculptures, paintings, or illustrations—have remained a fixture in the experience of most Christians. Adventist children are raised on images of the gentle Jesus as depicted by Harry Anderson.

In our postmodern consciousness, the primary debate about such images is no longer one of theology but rather one of ethnicity. We are, perhaps rightly, concerned more about accurately portraying Christ’s

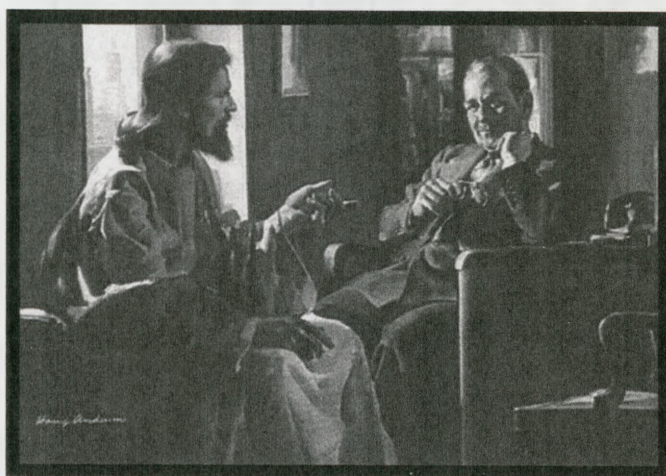
Middle Eastern heritage than wrestling with the nature of the incarnation.

The desire to depict a Christ who speaks to the widest range of cultures and genders was exemplified in the image of *Jesus of the People*, the winning entry in an art contest sponsored by the *National Catholic Reporter* that called for depictions of Christ for the new millennium. The artist, Janet McKenzie, emphasized in this winning image her “commitment to inclusivity” in both ethnicity and gender.¹⁹ The dark-skinned figure appears at first to be African American, but the background also includes elements from other spiritual traditions, including a Native American feather and a Yin-Yang symbol.

One of the judges, art critic Sister Wendy Beckett, says of the image, “This is a haunting image of a peasant Jesus—dark, thick lipped, looking out on us with ineffable dignity, with sadness but with confidence.” Although the final image is not overtly feminine, the artist chose to use a female model in order “to incorporate, once and for all, women who had been so neglected and left out, into this image of Jesus.”²⁰

How would eighth-century iconoclasts have responded to such an image onto which we have imposed our postmodern sensibilities? How does such an image differ from the Byzantine icons in which the creative impulses of the artist were subordinated to the stylized attempt to transcend earthly reality and depict the divine?

When reading the history of the iconoclastic movement, we may be tempted to cheer for women such as Irene and Theodora as they faithfully defend their icons—and yet for Protestants such sympathies



Adventist Harry Anderson’s paintings usually depict a gentleman Jesus who associates with middle-class Americans.

seem akin to cheering for the wrong team. This quandary can be seen even in Ellen White's comments about art as she warned against it even while she celebrated its usefulness. Although Ellen White argued that "art can never attain to the perfection seen in nature," even she recognized the power of art to draw people to the truth:²¹

Many may be reached best through sacred pictures, illustrating scenes in the life and mission of Christ. By this means truths may be vividly imprinted upon their minds, never to be effaced. The Roman Catholic Church understands this fact, and appeals to the senses of people through the charm of sculpture and paintings. While we have no sympathy for image worship, which is condemned by the law of God, we hold that it is proper to take advantage of that almost universal love of pictures in the young, to fasten in their minds valuable moral truths....²²

Despite acknowledging the power of images to lead people to truth, she still warned against the extra time and expense that accompanied the proliferation of illustrations in publications: "The almost endless succession of wearisome research and delay and anxiety, and the great expense in increasing facilities to multiply illustrations is simply leading in advance in a species of idolatry."²³

In tension with this utilitarian impulse toward economy, she urged that only images of the highest quality be used: "We want to be true in all our representations of Jesus Christ. But many of the miserable daubs put into our books and papers are an imposition on the public."²⁴ Thus, we see even within her statements on art the struggle between good stewardship and aesthetic sensibilities that brings so many church committees to grief.

Perhaps in a world where celebrities and mass media have become our new icons, the Church should give careful consideration to the theological implications of the images we select—whether in television broadcasts, book illustrations, or mass mailings.²⁵ Although conversations about art in our churches will always carry with them the baggage of our Protestant and utilitarian roots, we should acknowledge that we project an image of Christ in every church we build and every evangelistic series we televise.

What picture of Christ do we project to the



Janet McKenzie's *Jesus of the People* was praised for its depiction of a peasant, minority Jesus.

world? In our fear of idolatry have we replaced Christ Pantocrator with sterile, timid projections of our own fears? Rather than limit our debates about art within the church to anti-Catholic rhetoric or utilitarian constraints, we should examine the theological implications of the earlier iconoclastic debate and make sure that the picture of Christ we project to the world is instead always infused with both divinity and humanity—and not limited by our inherited aesthetic sensibilities.



Notes and References

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3. Alain Besançon, *The Forbidden Image: An Intellectual History of Iconoclasm*, trans., Jane Marie Todd (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2000), 109-10.

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7. *Ibid.*, 135-36.

8. Robin Cormack, *Writing in Gold: Byzantine Society and its Icons* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1985), 47.

9. Mathews, *Clash of the Gods*, 177.

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12. For this following history/timeline of the iconoclastic movement I am indebted to Alice-Mary Talbot's *Byzantine Defenders of Images* (Washington, D.C.: Dumbarton Oaks, 1998), ix-xvi.

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23. See especially, "Overuse of Pictures a Species of Idolatry," from *Manuscript Releases* Volume 15 of 21 (Hagerstown, Md.: Review and Herald, 1981-91), (whole series pub dates), 116-117, 85-86 (fifteenth volume pub. dates).

24. *Counsels to Writers and Editors*, "Illustrating Our Literature," Letter 145, 1899 (Nashville, Tenn.: Southern Publishing, 1946), 171.

25. See the winter 2005 edition of *Spectrum* for a recent discussion of Adventist media and celebrity.

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