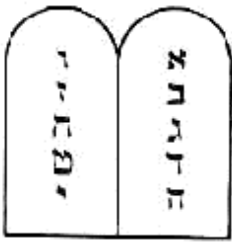


# *Icons, Images and Idols*

*What's the difference?*



## DO ORTHODOX CHRISTIANS WORSHIP IMAGES?



When a non-Orthodox Christian enters a temple of our Church, the first thing that strikes him is the number of images in it. Seeing the Orthodox kissing the icons, lighting candles in front of them and carrying them in procession; the first phrase that pops into their heads is: That's idolatry! When we ask them why they say this, they quote the Old Testament text: "You shall not make for yourself any graven image, or of what is in heaven above, or of things on earth beneath. Thou shalt not bow down to them or worship them, for I am a jealous God." (Exodus 20:4-5) Most non-Orthodox Christians literally believe that these words forbid having any kind of image, let alone venerating or honouring them; and they think that because the Orthodox Church uses images (icons), it practices idolatry.

### DOES GOD FORBID ALL IMAGES?

To some people, a cursory reading of the Book of Exodus and other books of the Bible seems to tell them that God forbids all imagery. Is it true? If we ask them if God contradicts Himself, they will say NO. But... If we read the Holy Scriptures carefully, we see that God on the one hand forbids the making of images, and then... He sends Moses to make them! "*And thou shalt make two cherubim of solid gold; you shall make them at the two ends of the mercy seat...*" (Exodus 25:18)



God manifested Himself to Moses in the midst of the golden images of the cherubim: "*There I will meet you; from above the mercy seat, from between the two cherubim placed on the ark of the Testimony, I will communicate to you all that I shall command you...*" (Exodus 25:22)

In the Book of Numbers we see that God uses the image of the serpent to miraculously heal the sick. "*And God said to Moses, 'Make yourself a brazen serpent and put it on a pole. Everyone who has been bitten and looks at it will live.'*" Moses made a bronze serpent and put it on a pole. And if a serpent bit a man and he looked at the bronze serpent, he was left alive."

Does God contradict Himself then? No, for the images that God forbids are idols or false gods.

## THE IDOLS

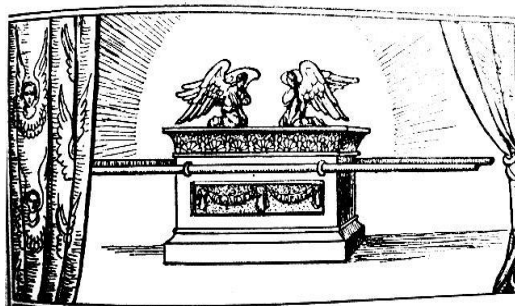
An idol is an image of a false god, it is anything we put in place of the True God. When God brought His people Israel out of Egypt, all the peoples of the region were pagans: Assyrians, Phoenicians, Canaanites, Greeks, etc. These people believed in a multitude of gods: Baal, Ishtar, Moloch, Aphrodite, Pan, and thousands of other gods. These gods were represented by means of images that were worshipped and sacrifices were offered to them, often human. Idols are worshipped as if by their very nature they had divine properties: they are bathed, fed and watered...



Modern idols are riches, earthly happiness, physical pleasures, the reverent admiration of warlords and leaders, whether political, artistic, or sporting. "Science" also becomes an idol when its voice takes precedence over faith. An idol is everything to which man is excessively bound and for which he sacrifices his strength and health to the detriment of the salvation of the soul, such as drug addiction, alcoholism, smoking, gambling. These vices are cruel idols to which sinners sacrifice their lives. Regarding these idols God tells us, "*You shall have no other God besides me.*" (Exodus 20:3)

## GOD AND THE OTHER IMAGES

The Bible tells us that King Solomon embellished the Temple of God with images: "*He carved everything around the walls of the house with engravings of cherubim sculptures, palm trees, open buds, inside and out.*" (1 Kings 6:29) Under the Sea of Bronze he carved images: "*He leaned on twelve oxen, three facing north, three facing west, three facing south, and three facing east; the sea was upon them, their hindquarters being inward.*" (1 Kings 7:25)

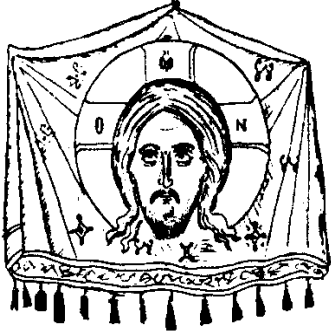


"*On the panel between the slats were lions, oxen, and cherubim. Same thing about the slats. Above and below the lions and bulls were wisps...*" (v. 29).

Let us now see what was God's reaction to these images and Solomon's action in having them built: "*I have heard the prayer and supplication that you have addressed before me. I have sanctified this House which you have built for me to put my Name in it forever; My eyes and my heart will always be on her.*" (1 Kings 9:3) When our Lord Jesus Christ visited the Temple sanctified by His Father, He

never said anything against these images. Thus, we can see that God is not bothered by images that are not idols, for they do not take the place of God.

## THE ICONS



What kind of images are icons? Why are they NOT idols? Why do we revere them? Icon is a Greek word that means image, representation. In the Orthodox Faith, an icon representing the Holy Trinity or the Saviour is not seen as a deity but only as a remembrance of the true God. The icon conveys in colours and outlines what the Holy Scriptures convey with words, the image is as symbolic as the word. Praying before an icon, the Orthodox do not worship the material of which it is made, but the one who is represented in it.

Man is formed in such a way that his sight, hearing, and other senses exert an enormous influence upon his thoughts and spiritual disposition. It is much easier to turn our thoughts to the Saviour and perceive His nearness when we see before us His Most Pure Face or His Cross, rather than before us a bare wall or something else that might distract the mind from prayer. For more than half the time of the Old Testament there were no images of the Lord in the Tabernacle or in Solomon's temple, because men were not yet worthy of it.

Nor were there any images of the saints of old, for the men of that time had not yet been redeemed or justified (Romans 3:9-25; Matthew 11:11). According to tradition, the Lord Jesus Christ Himself sent the miraculous image of his face, later called "not man-made" (Mandylyon), to the prince of Edessa, Abgarus, who was cured of his illness after having prayed before the image.

St. Luke, the Evangelist was a physician and also an iconographer, according to tradition he has left icons of the Most Holy Mother of God, some of which were taken to Greece and Russia. Subsequently, of these icons of the Saviour and the Theotokos, the Christians made copies; many of whom were glorified by the Lord through miracles. This is how miraculous icons came into being.

