

John Calvin for Everyone
The Institutes of the Christian Religion
Book 1 – Chapter 11

IT IS UNLAWFUL TO ATTRIBUTE A VISIBLE FORM TO GOD, AND GENERALLY WHOEVER SETS
UP IDOLS REVOLTS AGAINST THE TRUE GOD

As Calvin continues to consider the nature of and our relationship with God, he enters into a discussion of idols. Calvin's concern is focused on the Roman and Eastern Churches' willingness to have statues and icons as an integral part of their religious life.

Summary: Calvin believes that the only true witness to God is God's own self-revelation. In other words only God can reveal God's true nature, thus there is no physical object that can do so. Calvin claims that God's glory is corrupted *"whenever any form is attached to him" and that images turn God's "truth into falsehood."* (pg. 100) The basis for this belief is the commandment *"You shall not make for yourself any graven image, nor any likeness."* (Exodus 20:4). As regards to God appearing "face to face" with Moses or appearing as a human being to Abraham, these according to Calvin, were no more than a *"prelude to his revelation in Christ."* (Pg. 102) Calvin even argues that those physical manifestations of God, while perhaps being understandable in the past ages were no longer necessary because that *"childish age...for which rudiments of this sort were intended, is gone by."* (pg. 101)

Calvin next turns to the prophets Isaiah, Hosea and Micah in order to bolster his argument concerning the prohibition of images and idols. He states that *"the prophet heaps up fury in a psalm because men endowed with the intelligence to know that all things are moved solely by God's power call upon dead and insensible things for help."* (pg. 104) Calvin also comments on icons that *"we must note that a "likeness" no less than a "graven image is forbidden."* (pg.104) This is followed by Calvin examining the view of the Roman church (from Pope Gregory) that *"images are the books of the uneducated."* (pg. 105) Calvin refutes this claim by quoting the Council of Elvira (ca. 308 CE) that *"It is decreed that there shall be no pictures in church, that what is revered shall not be depicted on walls."* (Pg. 106)

Calvin then enters into an extended critique of the Roman Church and its use of statues. First he criticizes the statues for their immodesty and lack of virtue. Next he argues that if the church had done its job of teaching the faithful about God's Word and mysteries there would be no need of any images to tell the story. From there Calvin reminds his readers that any time someone bows down to an idol/statue there enters in superstition and a sense that the idol is insuring that God hears the prayers of the petitioner. He then returns to the theme of the church not having done its job. He writes, *"Thus it was when the purity of the ministry had somewhat degenerated that they were first introduced for the adornment of churches."* (pg. 112)

This does not mean however that Calvin opposes all art. He sees sculpture and painting as gifts of God. The only real limitation is that they not be used in churches as objects of reverence because of the superstition that normally attaches itself to them.

Reflection: For Calvin the center of all Christian faith is the Word of God. It is the compass which points us to God and the story which tells us about God. Thus it inspires true worship of God. This is the reason Calvin thought the church ought to be focused upon study, preaching and teaching rather than the veneration of saints, especially through statues, icons and paintings. This belief, that scripture is central, was the foundation for the Reformers focus on literacy and education because everyone needed to know how to read to read God's Word.

Questions:

1. What has been your experience of the use of icons, art and statues as part of your faith journey?
2. How would you classify stained glass windows? Are they idols? Are they simply art?
3. Calvin believed that churches should contain no art at all...be very plain with clear glass windows. How does that strike you?