

Iconoclasm—Andreas Bodenstein von Karlstadt Argues against Images (1522)

Abstract

The Franconian Andreas Bodenstein von Karlstadt (1486-1541) was the chancellor of the University of Wittenberg, where Martin Luther was a professor of theology. An early ally of Luther, Karlstadt introduced radical reforms in worship and religious practice in 1521-22. (At the time, Luther was in hiding after the Diet of Worms.) From the start, Karlstadt favored the removal of religious images, which he and others regarded as forbidden idols. After Luther returned to Wittenberg and quarreled with him, Karlstadt left the university to become a pastor. Although he was banished from Saxony in 1524, Luther protected him—but only after the radical retracted his concessions. A major instigator of the Eucharistic quarrel that divided the Protestants, Karlstadt ended his life as a preacher and professor in Basel, where he died of the plague.

Source

On the Removal of Idols

- i. That we have images^[1] in churches and houses of God is wrong and contrary to the first commandment. Thou shalt not have other gods.
- ii. That to have carved and painted idols set up on the altars is even more injurious and diabolical.
- iii. Therefore it is good, necessary, praiseworthy, and pious that we remove them and give Scripture its due and in so doing accept its judgement.

God's houses are buildings in which God alone should be glorified, invoked, and adored. As Christ says: My house is a house of prayer and you make it a murderers' cave [Matth. 21:13]. Deceitful images bring death to those who worship and praise them, as it is written of them: They are strangers to God and completely covered with shame and have become as loathsome as the things they have loved (Hosea 9[:10]). We could never deny that it is out of love that we have placed the so-called saints in churches. If we had not loved them, we would not have set them up where God alone should dwell and rule. Had we been opposed to them, we would have fled them rather than embraced them. Our deeds convict us of loving images. Have we not shown them the honour which we show exclusively to great lords? Why have we caused them to be painted and coloured, to be adorned with velvet, damask, silver, and golden robes? Why do we deck them out with golden crowns? With precious stones? And offer them that honour and love that we do not willingly give our children, our wives, our parents, our most exalted princes and lords? Who can believe us when we say: We have not loved the idols, the carved and painted images? When our actions have betrayed us? God hates and is jealous of pictures, as I will demonstrate, and considers them an abomination, and proclaims that all men in his eyes are like the things they love. Pictures are loathsome. It follows that we also become loathsome when we love them.^[2]

Thus images bring death to those who worship or venerate them. Therefore, our temples might be rightly called murderers' caves, because in them our spirit is stricken and slain. May the Devil reward the popes who thus bring death and destruction upon us. It would be a thousand times better if they [images] were set up in hell or the fiery furnace than in the houses of God.

Now hear more about the nature and origin of the house built for God. Solomon speaks as follows: Thy

house, O God, is made solely that there thou mightest regard the devotion of thy servant and accept the prayers that he pours out before thee and thine eyes are upon this house day and night, wherein thy name shall be invoked (2 Chronicles 6[:19–21] and 1 Kings 8[:28–30]). In the same book Solomon enumerates many things which ought to be uniquely dedicated to God. Thus it is especially amazing to me how God has borne and suffered our great evil up to this time.

See! The house of God is made for this purpose, that he alone should rule in it and, as our helper, should open his eyes to us in our need. Further, God alone should be worshipped there. Moreover, only God's name should be invoked there. I would like to know what answer we could give to true Christians and Jews, who have an understanding of the Bible, or even to God, who has given us his teaching through the Holy Spirit, when they or he asks: How is it that you are so audacious as to set up images and idols in my house? How can you be so bold and impudent that in my house you bow down and kneel before pictures which have been made by the hands of men? Such honours belong to me. You light candles before them. But if you want to set candles burning and blazing, you should do so [only] for me. You bring them wax offerings in the form of your afflicted legs, arms, eyes, head, feet, hands, cows, calves, oxen, tools, house, court, fields, meadows, and the like, just as if the pictures had healed your legs, arms, eyes, heads, etc. or had bestowed upon you fields, meadows, houses, honours and possessions.[3]

Therefore you confess other gods. I heal you and [bear] your [sorrows]. I have nourished them and carried them in my hands and they have not known that I have healed them and borne their sorrows (Hosea 11[:3]). I have redeemed them and they have spoken lies against me. I have taught them and strengthened their arms and they imagine mischief against me (Hosea 7[:13,15]). I have nourished them and raised them up, but they scorn me.

The ox knows his owner and the dull-witted ass the master's crib. But Israel (that is my people) knows me not and my people do not understand the good I have done for them. Alas for the sinful nation (Isaiah 1[:2–4]). I cannot deny, but must confess, that God might in all justice say to our supposed Christians what he said to the Jews. For they run to the idols like crows and ravens after a carcass and fly to a lifeless cadaver. They seek them in particular places, such as Wilsnack in the Brandenburg Mark, Grimmenthal, Rome, and similar places. They bring them tools, silver, gold, wax, and goods as if they were their gods who have delivered them, who have protected them and they are far blinder than the ox in Leipzig or the ass in n.n. who indeed know what good is given them and from whom it comes. So they invoke idols in the house of God and seek health, support, and counsel from insensate dummies. And the people vilify God in his house, which is a good and important enough reason to drag idols out of the churches. Not to mention that many a man doffs his cap, which he would wear if his man-made god were not before him. I do not regard it lightly that they bend a knee before the saints. I say more of this in what follows.[4]

That to assume a posture of veneration before pictures is contrary to the first commandment no one should have to learn from me, but, rather, should learn from Scripture. In Exodus 20[:3] it is written: Thou shalt have no other gods. That is to say, you should not attribute the goodness, support, grace, mercy, and forbearance of God to any other but the true God. Learn that through an example: God led the Jews out of Egypt and delivered them from the chains of servitude. They should have attributed that same goodness to no other god. But they made a calf and said: These are the gods of Israel which have led you out of Egypt (Exodus 32[:4]).[5]

That calf was an alien god that had not freed the Jews, and they nevertheless said that it had led them out of Egypt. Thus all men make alien gods when they ascribe the benefits they have received to any but the true God. This is what grieves God himself over and over again in Scripture, as I have said above. That is the reason for which God reproaches Israel: that they chose a king (1 Sam. 8[:4–10]; Hosea 13[:1–2]).

One can make a man into an alien god. A man can proclaim himself to be an alien god, as it is written.

Cursed is the man who puts his faith in a man and strengthens his arm. But blessed is the man who puts his hope in God, whose hope is the Lord (Jeremiah 17[:5-7]). That is the reason the Prophets again and again bind themselves with an oath, saying: I will not place my trust in my bow, and my sword will not save me [Psalm 43:7]. You shall not put confidence in princes [Psalm 117:9]. They say this because they will not make any other god and because they want no image in their hearts. They want to confess him alone who cannot be depicted. For God cannot tolerate that.

For this reason God said (immediately after he gave the commandment, Thou shalt have no other gods before me): Thou shalt make no carved or graven image. Thou shalt make no likeness of anything in the heavens above or the earth below or that is in the water. Thou shalt not worship them. Thou shalt not venerate them. I am your God, a strong and vengeful God, a jealous God who punishes the sons for the sins of their fathers (Exodus 20[:4ff.]).

See how God prohibits any kind of image because men are frivolous and are inclined to worship them. For this reason God said: Thou shalt not worship them, thou shalt not honour them. Thereby God prohibits all veneration and smashes the refuge of the papists who at all times do violence to Scripture through their subtlety and make black out of white, evil out of good. Thus if one were to say: Indeed, I do not worship images; I do not venerate them for themselves, but for the sake of saints which they signify. God's answer is short and clear.

Thou shalt not worship them. Thou shalt not venerate them. Make whatever gloss you can, thou shalt absolutely not worship them, thou shalt not bend thy knee before them, thou shalt not light a candle before them. God says: If I had wanted you to venerate me or my saints in pictures, I would not have forbidden you to make pictures and likenesses.

Now I want to prove that Christians must confess that they venerate their idols. The grounds [for the proof]: because they bow and scrape before them (for the sake of dead holy men) I can definitely conclude that they venerate images. For if I venerate a marshal in the name of the prince he serves, I venerate both him and his prince. I venerate the servant as the servant of the prince, and do so before I venerate the prince. Thus it cannot be denied that some of the veneration goes to him as a servant. Therefore, when I venerate an image because of God, I truly venerate that which God has forbidden.^[6]

Now I will ask in addition, is it a trifling honour that we call images saints? If we were willing to think clearly, we would find that we deflect honour from the true saints and transfer it to deceitful pictures of them. Therefore, we are calling images saints and attributing sanctity to them.

Moreover, it cannot be denied that it is a great honour to be on the altar. Indeed, the pope deems it such an honour that he permits no pious layman to stand or recline on an altar. It is truly a great and high honour when you put someone in the place where one handles the body of Christ, where God alone should be invoked, on the altar that has been established for the special honour of God, for his own veneration.

Altars were invented so that one might invoke God's name on them, and on them make sacrifices and venerate him alone. For this reason Noah built his altar (Gen. 8[:20]). Likewise Abraham (Gen. 12[:8]). Likewise Moses (Exodus 17[:15]). Thus God indicated the reasons for altars (Exodus 20[:24ff.]): that his name should be praised and whatever sacrifices one wants to make be offered to him. We offer such veneration to idols when we place them on altars and light candles before them, and when we call upon them in the name of the saints they represent. Everything that we perform on altars we should do for God (Deut. 27[:5?]). Therefore it is never possible to have them on the altars and at the same time wish to deny that we venerate them.

Now because altars were established exclusively for invoking the name of God, it is far more diabolic to

put images of the saints on altars than to nail them to walls. This we will discuss in the next section.

Pope Gregory has not forgotten his papist nature and offers to a likeness the veneration which God has given to his Word, and says that pictures are the books of the laity. Is it not truly a papist teaching and prompting of the Devil to say that Christ's sheep may use forbidden and deceitful books and examples?[7]

Christ says: My sheep listen to my voice [John 10:27]. He does not say: They see my image or images of the saints.

God says: My sheep are the sheep of my pasture [John 10:16]. That is to say, the pasture of my teachings, not the pasture of my images.

Moses says: You shall teach your children the Word of God from their youth. But Gregory says: The laity shall use images for books. Tell me, dear Gregory, or have someone else tell me, what good things could the laity indeed learn from images? Certainly you must say that one learns from them nothing but the life and the suffering of the flesh and that they do not lead further than to the flesh. More they cannot do. For example, from the image of the crucified Christ you learn only about the suffering of Christ in the flesh, how his head hung down, and the like. Now Christ says that his own flesh is of no use but that the spirit is of use and gives life [John 6:64]. Thus Peter too says that Christ had words of eternal life and spirit [John 6:69]. Since, then, images are deaf and dumb, can neither see nor hear, neither learn nor teach, and point to nothing other than pure and simple flesh which is of no use, it follows conclusively that they are of no use. But the Word of God is spiritual and alone is useful to the faithful.

Therefore it is not true that images are the books of the laity. For they may learn nothing of salvation from them, and take absolutely nothing from them which serves salvation or is necessary to a Christian life. I do not want to go on at length and [thereby] give images the veneration which Gregory offers his idols. I note, however, why the popes have put such books [i.e. images] before the laity. They observed that when they pastured their lambs in books [i.e. Scripture] their rubbish market did not flourish. And one would want to know what is godly and ungodly, right and wrong. Paul says that we should persevere in the teaching of Christ [1 Tim. 4:16], and Christ proclaims that he taught his disciples the Word of his Father (John 17[:6]). They never thought of an image.

Christ also says that the truth makes men free and makes them his disciples (John 8[:31-32]). No image can do that. Thus saying that likenesses are the books of the laity is precisely the same as saying that the laity ought not to be the disciples of Christ, should never be free from the bonds of the Devil, and should also not enter into the godly and Christian life. Paul also teaches that we should have no connection with those who venerate likenesses (1 Cor. 5[:11]), and adds: You should not venerate images. You should flee the honouring of images (1 Cor. 10[:14]). See how Paul hates the reverence of likenesses and how we ought to have nothing in common with those who venerate images thus, even if they do not actually worship them.

Indeed, they say, Paul says that images are nothing (1 Cor. 8[:4]). We also know in our hearts, [they say,] that images are not gods and that there is only one God. Answer: I wish to God that those who use images for books really did know that in their hearts, but I cannot believe it. And did you not also hear that Paul says that we should flee the honouring of images?

Do you not know that Paul says that those who do such things will not possess the kingdom of God [1 Cor. 6:9]? How can you bring the laity to the kingdom of God when you offer to a likeness that veneration which God has given to his Word alone? When you put them in the place where God alone should be venerated and invoked? I want now, O Priest, O Monk, to stir your heart and make you come to the conclusion that you cleave to images and have a true idol in the image that the hands of men have made.

Now, finally, you should also take it to heart that I absolutely cannot advise the mortally ill to cling to carved or painted crucifixes. The reason is that they serve no purpose, as has been said, and cannot bring the sick any further than to the physical suffering of Christ, which is of no avail, as Christ himself says: The flesh is of no use (John 6[:64]). It does not please Paul that you know Christ after the flesh. Therefore he says: We do not know Christ according to the flesh [2 Cor. 5:16]. But our image-lovers want the laity to know Christ in the flesh, which avails nothing. They want to teach how Christ hung on the cross rather than why he was hanged. They teach about his body, his beard, his wounds. Of the power of Christ they teach nothing at all. But without the power of Christ no one is saved. So I say, in the first place, that many thousands will be saved without the physical presence of Christ, and, second, that images in general are forbidden and prophets have preached against likenesses (Habakkuk 2[:19]). God says: Woe to him who says to the wood, Awake! And to the silent stone says, *Surge* or Rise up! How can a piece of wood or a lump of stone teach? It may well be decorated with silver or gold, but there is no spirit in it (Habakkuk 2[:19]). Behold then how God heaps evil upon those who say to a piece of wood: Wake up! That is, in effect, said when you show devotion to a piece of wood. God also says: Woe to him who says to a stone, Rise up—which is to say—Help me. Thus fools say to the dying when they are caught in the snares of death: See, now you have the Lord Jesus in your hands. Habakkuk says there is no spirit in a likeness. When God rises up, all likenesses fall. Where images sit, God cannot be. As it is written in the fifth chapter of Micah: I will destroy the likenesses in your midst and you shall no longer pray to the works of your own hands [Micah 5:12]. Thirdly, even if I did profess that likenesses should be allowed, which no Christian can, nevertheless there is no consolation except in the Word of God, in which the just man has his life, health, and salvation. Therefore it is incomparably wiser that you recite the two gospel texts which the Lord gave at the end and before his death. That is to say, that you explain to sick and dying man the content and meaning of these comforting words: My body is given for you; my blood is poured out for you for the forgiveness of sins [Luke 22:17ff.]. These gospel texts have a living spirit. The image of Christ is nothing other than wood, stone, silver or gold, and the like. Fourthly, I must tell the Gregorists the story of Bishop Epiphanius who in the time of Jerome removed a cloth from the church because an image of a saint or a crucified Christ was painted on it in violation of the scriptural prohibition. It can be seen clearly from this that early on the Christians hated likenesses and banished them from the houses of God. Epiphanius arrived in Anablatha and there went into a church and saw a dyed and painted curtain on the door which had an image that was a likeness of Christ or of a saint. He says that he did not really know what image it was, but nevertheless he did not want to allow it in the church because it hung there contrary to Scripture. Therefore, he cut down the curtain. This is to be found in the writings of Jerome. Even if I might admit that the laity could learn something useful of salvation from images, nevertheless I could not permit that which is contrary to scriptural prohibitions and against God's will. Scripture clearly states that God hates the pictures which the papists call books and is jealous of them. I ask you, if you were opposed in your heart to an image and wanted neither to see it nor hear it, how would you like it if someone wanted to learn about you and venerate you in such a hateful and horrible book [i.e. the book of images]? Without a doubt you would hate and shun me with my little book or image if I wanted to honour you by means of that which you forbid, which you hate, and which you shun. Now God says that he cannot tolerate any image which we make, and that he hates and is jealous of all who love images, as we said above. And Isaiah writes (Isaiah 42[:17]): Those who trust in images shall be tormented with shame.

Note that God made an image of fire. And he ordered a serpent to be made which was not the image of him, but was erected for no other purpose than that those who had been bitten or wounded by snakes might look upon that image and be made whole (Num. 21[:9]). That image was given by God himself and was not created by a human mind. Nevertheless, Scripture praises King Hezekiah (2:18[:4]) for breaking the bronze serpent in pieces because the Jews sacrificed to it.^[8]

Our images are not from God; indeed, they are forbidden by God. Still we try to defend them, heedless that the many poor people who offer them candles and money, who kneel and uncover their heads

before them, injure and do harm to themselves in that way. Yet we go on defending idols and images, preserve them in the churches, and allow the poor innocent lambs of God to come to grief through such terrible abuse. And we want to honour them as books.

Therefore I must again speak of the uselessness of images. But everything according to Scripture, for I do not desire anyone to believe me or accept my authority. Indeed, may the Devil thank you if you believe me and accept my authority. Turn your ears and eyes to Scripture, which says: The makers of images are nothing and there is no profit in the most precious and most cherished thing [Isaiah 44:9].

They themselves witness that their images see and understand nothing (Isaiah 44[:9]). Here make note, you idolatrous unbeliever, that the maker of an image is nothing and that his very best work avails nothing. Yes, certainly, they are of no use for salvation. You yourself must confess that you will not ask an image-maker what profits you for salvation because he is a image-maker. How, therefore, can Pope Gregory make so bold as to say, Images are the books of the laity, when artists can teach nothing useful for salvation? Note that your artists can see, hear, and understand and bear witness to the fact that their images can neither see nor hear, nor have understanding. And you do not and ought not to want image-makers as books. How, then, could you take images for books?

How could images be useful to you as books? Who can deny that books are useful? No one. Who may say that images are useful when your maker of images is useless? No one. Now I want to briefly demonstrate that images in themselves are also useless, proving everything with reference to Isaiah 44. He is an evangelical prophet. Isaiah says [44:9–11]: Who has formed or made God and made the graven image that profits nothing? Behold, all the makers and friends of images are shamed. They shall all be gathered together and be frightened and made to tremble.

And he goes on to tell, almost mockingly and sarcastically, how the idols are made and are of no profit [44:12–16].

Nor can I pass over in silence the fact that God cannot suffer any of the bowing and scraping and stooping with which we honour the idols. Thus God speaks through Isaiah.

The maker of images makes an image and bows before it. He bows before it and prays and says: Free me, deliver me, for you are my god [Isaiah 44:17].

Thus, they have forgotten that the eyes of the image do not see and they have no understanding in their hearts and do not consider what they have said before: I have burned half the wood with which I have made this god. And with one half of the branch I have roasted my meat and fired my oven. With the other half I have made this idol. Before this chunk of wood I want to fall down [Isaiah 44:18–19]. At the end of the same chapter God says: I am the Lord who made all things and no one with me (Isaiah 44[:24]).

If I had time and space I would gladly treat Isaiah more thoroughly, but for the sake of brevity I will begin with the end and then come back to the start, thereby returning to the introductory material. See, and note well, that images in churches are contrary to the first commandment. And that God does not tolerate our placing anything created next to him. Thus he proclaims: I am the Lord who made all things and none with me.

You holy gluttons should mark well that God alone gives aid and no one else with him or beside him. So it must indeed be true (if the truth is to be the truth) that nothing created next to God can help us. Now tell me, you worshipper or venerator of idols, if the saints could not help you, how could deceitful images help you? You want to venerate the saints in images and offer [them] that very veneration which in their lives they shunned and forbade. They, when they were alive, did not allow you to make offerings to them or invoke them, as Peter says: There is only one name among men whereby you may be saved (Acts 4[:12]). If there is only one name, why do you (blockhead) make many names among humankind in which

you promise salvation?

Do you not know that they looked at Peter and were amazed and Peter said: You men, what amazes you? And why do you look at us, as though we had made the lame man walk through our own power and force? We have made him whole through faith in the Lord Jesus who the God of Abraham, Isaac, and Jacob sent (Acts 3[:12ff.]). Observe, you fat and rotund image-maker, that in his life Peter forbade you to represent him after his death. Do you imagine that he would now give us another doctrine, and one contrary to that which he gave us when alive? You acknowledge that everything he said and taught [when he was alive] came from the Holy Spirit. Where else would his teaching come from in death? Peter said: You ought not look on us. But you respond to this now by saying: We should not look on images as if they did anything by virtue of their own power.

But listen! If only you spoke the truth. And if only you did not have a personal idol with a greater power over you. But what do you want to say about the revellers' verse: O Saint Christopher, your powers are so great that whoever looks upon you early in the morning shall laugh or live in the evening? Tell me how many thousands of people have paused to gaze for a time upon the image of St Christopher in order that they might be protected from sudden death? And that they might live happily until the night. Have these people not put much hope and trust and sought consolation in looking at depictions of St Christopher?[\[9\]](#)

Because of this scandalous state of affairs you should counsel [everyone] to believe that all images should be dragged down to the Devil. For behold now whether these people do not look up to the image of Christopher as a god.

You must also admit to me that many of the laity take great comfort and put much hope in other images.

Is not this kind of an entreaty called worship? Dear lord come, come, come to my aid. Is that not to say: Dear image free me, save me, preserve me from sudden death?

Look! You have permitted the laity to light candles before images of Sts Paul, Peter, and Barnabas, and bring them offerings, something which the saints themselves, in their lifetimes, shunned like the plague. Nevertheless, if you are the super-clever philosopher, if you are such an erudite fellow, I beg you, in a friendly way, to tell me whether Paul, Peter, and Barnabas would themselves have permitted us to place them [their images] on altars? You must say no and no again. Why do you set their forbidden images on altars, images which they would not have accepted? Note also, my dear friend, that to bow and kneel are forms of veneration which you give to images against the will of God, as was demonstrated in the passage from Isaiah 44 cited above.

Mark also how mad, foolish, and nonsensical are those who give such veneration to images. For Isaiah says [Isaiah 44:17ff.]: They bow before their gods and prostrate themselves and have forgotten and do not understand that their images do not see or hear. They do not understand that they have carved splinters and wood from a log (which they believe to be a saint) with which they have cooked their meat and warmed their rooms. That they do not want to see. Therefore they shall be confounded, shall be afraid and tremble, and shall be destroyed. O how evil it will be for those who, caught in the throes of death, cleave unto idols and bow and kneel before them. It will be no excuse that they have done this to the saints. God knows their hearts better than they themselves and will accuse them with his Word because they have venerated images. For he said: Thou shalt not venerate them (Exodus 20[:5]).

Now I come back to the beginning and turn to Isaiah, who says: They are of no use (Isaiah 44[:10]).

Books are of use to readers. It follows that images are not books for the laity, contrary to what Gregory and his entire company say.

Listen to what Ezekiel says, you Gregorists and papists! If any man turns away from me and sets his heart upon idols and comes to a prophet and consults me through him, then I will in my own person answer him and will make him a sign and a proverb; I will cut him off from the midst of my people (Ezekiel 14[:7-8]). See here, you praiser of idols, what Ezekiel says about images and do not forget on your life that when you take an idol or image to your heart (as many do, as was said in connection with the image of St Christopher) God will destroy you and damn you and will answer you himself. Thus God answers us in his own words: You shall not look to prophets. But let the man who in these times inquires of doctors, masters, and bachelors of art about such things and does not believe unwaveringly in the voice of the Lord hear what follows in Ezekiel 14 [:9-10]: If a prophet errs, I, the Lord, have made him err and will destroy him from the midst of my people. See how God destroys both the prophet who errs and makes others err, and [also] the man who consults such a prophet. Act accordingly.

If a man knows the prohibition and will of God, he should follow it strictly and listen neither to angels, nor to saints, nor to prophets who want to lure him away from the divine commandment, although they may appear to mean well. The story in 1 Kings 13 teaches this in clear words.

God sent one of his servants to King Jeroboam and ordered him not to eat or drink [in the house of the king]. That prophet or man of God, Semeas, understood God's prohibition, but he allowed himself to be led astray by another prophet, who said: I am a prophet also, as you are, and an angel of God inspired me, saying, Take him back with you in your house that he may eat and drink. Semeas did that and was disobedient to the Word of God. Therefore God had him torn apart by a lion (1 Kings 13[:1ff., especially verse 24]).

Note that when we have the Word of the Lord and want to be disobedient to the will of God and allow ourselves to be persuaded and deceived by others, we must die. Even if the persuasive but deceitful man takes the form of a prophet, or an angel, or a teacher, or a Christian who performs a good Christian work for you and wants to give you food and drink, if his good deed prevents you from being obedient to the divine words and commandments, you shall not follow him; not even if he were a stout, brawny, fat monk or doctor [of theology]. But if you follow someone because of his position, appearance, beautiful words, and protestations of friendship, and thus fail to observe God's prohibition, you must certainly die (like Semeas) by the lion who walks about in the world seeking whom he may devour [1 Peter 5:8].

Therefore God slew the sons of Aaron, Nadab, and Abihu, because they offered before God an alien fire which he had not commanded (Levi 10[:1ff.]).

Note that when one [of them] ignited a fire which was identical in character and heat to the fire of the Lord, nevertheless, because it was alien, God punished those who offered such a fire.

Accordingly, I say that even though pictures may have the appearance of a good thing, we should nevertheless not tolerate them in churches and among the faithful. For as Balaam had to confess: There is no picture in Jacob and no idol in Israel. This is clearly expressed in Numbers 23[:21] and Exodus 20[:4]. For this reason no Christian or believer should take up images, because he clearly hears [the Lord's commandment]: You shall have no images. The believer shall live according to the Word and disregard appearance, whatever shape or name it might have.

If someone comes and says that images teach and instruct the laity just as books do the learned, then answer him: God has forbidden me to use images and therefore I do not want to learn anything from them.

If someone else comes and says [that] images remind and recall to us the sufferings of the Lord and often bring it about that someone offers an Our Father and turns his mind to God who would otherwise neither pray nor be mindful of God, then you, my Christian, respond: God has forbidden images. Again, Christ

said that God is a spirit. All who truly worship God, worship him in the spirit (John 4[:24]). All who worship God in images, worship in untruth. Only in appearance and with outward show do they think on God. But their hearts are foreign to God, and [they] make themselves their own idol in their hearts and are full of lies. As Isaiah in chapter 44[:20] says: Your foolish and silly heart worships them and does not say, I have a lie in my right hand.

Also, no Christian can deny that spiritual prayer is divine work which God alone effects, as it is written in Jeremiah 33[:6]: I shall manifest to them prayer and the worship of peace and truth. What God alone can do, no image can. You also may not say that the image of Christ brings you Christ, for that is not true. No man can come to me except that my Father draw him (John 6[:44]). All who come to Christ must be disciples of God and not be reminded or taught by images to come to Christ.

If you heap together all the images on earth, they still will not be able to offer a single sigh to God on your behalf.

Whenever I want to have an outward admonition and reminder, I should ask for the one which Scripture indicates, not the one which it hates and forbids. I would much rather fall with horse and cart into sore tribulation and distress than come to an image to be reminded of salvation. Isaiah denies that images are of use, yet they would have to be of some use if they were to lead us to God in true thoughts (Isaiah 44[:10]). That affliction outwardly teaches and admonishes and makes us reflect and causes us to know, invoke, and worship God is taught in Scripture: Defeat and vexation give understanding (Isaiah 28[:19]). For you have punished me and I have been instructed (Jeremiah 31[:18]). God chastises us and teaches us, like a father his son (Proverbs 3[:12], Hebrews 12[:6]). God wants us to cry unto him in the day of our trouble (Psalm 85[:7]).

But God does not want us to call on him when we see images. He wants us to hate them and flee from them.

In that day when the Lord is exalted, men will cast away their images and flee from them (Isaiah 2[:17–18], 31[:7]; Micah 5[:12]). From this it follows that images are indeed not books from which we should learn.

A Christian, therefore, can understand that pictures should not be called books. Books instruct. But images can not instruct, as Habakkuk says in chapter 2[:19]. Habakkuk says of a stone idol: Is it possible that it can teach? From that it follows, and there is no gainsaying, that images are not books. For if they were books or could teach what books do, then they would have to teach and instruct. From all this everybody can see that Gregory the pope has indeed taught in a popish, that is to say unchristian, way when he offers pictures to the laity on the pretext they are books.

Scripture compares images and idols to youths and says that in many places the godless commit whoredom with images as whores do with youths. I must be crude and obnoxious, but I am not ashamed to speak as Scripture speaks—straightforwardly. I have shattered their hearts, which have turned from me. I have torn out their eyes which have gone whoring after images (Ezekiel 6[:9]). Again: You have made for yourself images in the shape of men and have been impure with them (Ezekiel 6[:9]). The gold and silver which I have given to you for your ornament you have used to make images and have whored with them. You have taken your clothes and clothed those same images with them (Ezekiel 16[:17–18]). We do that in the case of [Carnival] clowns whom we certainly have no intention of regarding as alien gods, much less being told that they are our gods. However we are open in word and deed before the world to the charge that we take images for gods and give them names and venerate them. For we call the image of the Crucified One a lord god and now and again say that it is the Lord Jesus. We also venerate it as though Christ himself were present. The unholy popes and crazy monks have brought us to this. We also say that this image is St Sebastian and that one is St Nicholas, and the like. Thus we name them as the

things God loves, and prove our guilt with our words and deeds that images are our gods; that our pictures are things with which our eyes commit whoredom. And it is true that all who venerate images or seek help from them or worship them are whores and adulterous women (Hosea 2, Ezekiel 16). (At this point I should have liked to settle accounts with a woman, one of the Devil's whores. But I hope she will become open to the guidance of the Holy Spirit. Let this parenthesis be my second warning to her).^[10] The Devil's whores who give their gold and silver to images (so that one can make images in churches out of that which God gave them for ornament) are like the whores of whom Ezekiel speaks in the sixteenth chapter as we noted above. They make images and consort illicitly with them and cover them with their clothes and bring them precious incense, bread, wine, beer, chickens, geese, and horses. And, in addition, they bring them their children and sick friends, regarding which God says: Do you think this childish behaviour is of no consequence and insignificant? We have many writings of this sort which revile the worshippers of images as whores and adulterous women and conclude that churches in which images are placed and venerated ought in all fairness to be regarded as whorehouses.

But all images, whether male, as St Sebald, or female, as Sts Ursula or Otilia or their kind are forbidden and should not be admitted without exception [into the church], as is written in Deuteronomy 4[:16], for Scripture calls such venerators of images whores and adulterous women and such deceitful images men. From this which we learn how highly regarded such idols are in the hearts of those who venerate and worship them.

That is also the reason God said in the first commandment: I am a jealous God (Exodus 20[:5]). He wants to be our only dear friend and that we should ask only him for help and pray to him alone. Thus do Hosea 2 [:24] and other prophets teach (Isaiah 1[:29], 44[:1ff.]).

God knows very well how dangerous and harmful images are and how we can be violated by them in an instant. Therefore, through Moses, he forbade them many times and often caused his prophets to condemn them.

No excuse or pretext can help you, even if you speak a thousand times. You say, I do not venerate the images of saints for their own sake but for the sake of what they represent. Ah, you impious whore, do you think God does not know your heart more profoundly and better than you? If God did not know that someone could so easily make an idol for which he feels nothing, then God would have allowed us to venerate images in names other than his own. Help yourself, cover yourself, and crawl into every hiding place and explain away your deed as you will and can; you will not, after all, slip away from the divine judgement and justice of God which absolutely forbids images and condemns all who carve or praise images or keep and venerate them (Deut. 27[:15]).

Now I want and shall say to all pious Christians that all those who stand in awe before pictures have idols in their hearts. And I want to confess my secret thoughts to the whole world with sighs and admit that I am faint-hearted and know that I ought not to stand in awe of any image and am certain that God expects of his people that they should not stand in awe of images, as it is written: You should not fear other gods, not worship, not venerate, and should not make offerings to them, but only to God (Judges 6[:10], 2 Kings 17[:35]). And I know that God dwelling in me is as small as my fear of idols is great. For God wants to fill our whole heart and will in no way tolerate that I should have a picture before my eyes. And again, when I put my trust in God with my whole heart, I need not ever fear his enemies.

Therefore God or his Spirit in sacred Scripture says: You shall not fear other gods. You shall not pray to them. You shall not venerate them. And he teaches us that it is the same thing to venerate images or to be in awe of them. For this reason I should not fear any image, just as I should not venerate any. But (I lament to God) from my youth onward my heart has been trained and grown up in the veneration and worship of pictures. And a harmful fear has been bred into me from which I would gladly deliver myself and cannot. As a consequence, I stand in fear that I might not be able to burn idols. I would fear that

some devil's block of wood [i.e. an idol] would do me injury. Although, on the one hand, I have Scripture and know that images have no power and also have no life, no blood, no spirit, yet, on the other hand, fear holds me and makes me stand in awe of the image of a devil, a shadow, the noise of a small leaf falling, and makes me flee that which I should confront in a manly way. Thus I might say, if one pulls a man's hair, one finds out how firmly it is rooted. Had I not heard the spirit of God cry out against the idols and read his word, I would have thought: I do not love any image; I do not stand in awe before any image. But now I know how I, in this case, stand toward God and images, and how strongly and deeply images are rooted in my heart.

May God confer his grace upon me so that I no longer venerate the Devil's heads (so one commonly calls the images of saints in the church) more than stone and wood. And God grant that I not venerate stone and wood with the appearances and names of saints. Amen. See here Jeremiah 10[:2-5].

From the texts quoted above it follows that Christians should strictly observe God's divine will, counsel, and command, and no longer tolerate images. And this notwithstanding the old evil custom and the pestilential teaching of priests that images are the books of the laity. For God has prohibited the making and keeping of images.

And God grieves deeply and painfully that we seek out images with any degree of confidence. And he says that they make the house of God impure and defile it (Jeremiah 32[:34]).

Thus we have credible and solid proof of our first two articles, namely the testimony of the Holy Spirit.

The proof for the third article flows naturally from the passages of Scripture which have been cited and is grounded on bedrock. Nevertheless, I want to adduce particular testimony for the third article from Scripture.

God says that you shall do it [i.e. remove images from churches]. You shall overturn and overthrow their altars. You shall smash their images. Their groves you shall hack down and their graven images you shall burn (Deut. 7[:5]). We have no divine altars, but rather heathen or human ones, as is pointed out in Exodus 20[:4]. Therefore Christians should remove them in accord with the content of Scripture, irrespective of the fact that they are external things. If you want to venerate God in outward ways or seek him in ceremonies, then you should follow his ceremonies and laws. The secular authorities should remove images and subject them to the judgement to which Scripture has subjected them.

I should also have hoped that the living God, having inspired in us a healthy desire for the removal of images, might have seen the task to its conclusion. But it has not yet happened perhaps because God lets his wrath down upon us drop by drop with the idea of pouring out his entire wrath if we remain blind and stand in awe before things which can do nothing for us.

I know that the authorities will be punished because Scripture does not lie.

Had, however, our rulers accepted divine counsel and fulfilled its command and driven the knavish and seductive blocks of wood from the church under pain of appropriate punishment, we would have to praise them as the Holy Spirit praised Hezekiah, who ripped down images, hacked down groves, and broke up the image which God had given,^[11] as is described in 2 Kings 18[:3ff.]. May God will that our lords be like the pious secular kings and lords of the Jews whom the Holy Spirit praises. In sacred Scripture they have always had the power to take action in churches and abolish what offends and hinders the faithful. By divine right they may force and compel priests to expel deceitful and damaging things. Anyone can see this in 2 Kings 23[:4ff.], where it is written that King Josiah ordered the high priest and the other priests to throw out all the vessels, pillars, and the like which were made for Baal; and he burnt them outside the city of Jerusalem. From this everyone should observe how in accord with divine justice priests should be subordinate to kings. For this reason our magistrates should not wait for the

priests of Baal to begin to remove their vessels, wooden blocks, and impediments, because they will never begin. The highest secular authority should command it and bring it about. But if they allow images it will be said of them as it was said of Manasseh in a similar case (2 Kings 21[:11ff.]). And if they would say: Our ancestors have established them and we want to follow in their path; Scripture answers: Ammon did wrong, as had his father Manasseh, and followed in the path that his father had taken (2 Kings 21[:20ff.]). As the mother was, so is the daughter. Your mother is a Hittite and your father an Amorite (Ezekiel 16[:45]). God cannot endure that we help ourselves through subterfuge, by saying, As our elders have gone, so will we go.[\[12\]](#)

Certain image-kissers say: The Old Law forbids images; the New does not. And we follow the New, not the Old Law.

Dear brothers, may God protect you from this heretical statement and prevent you from ever saying it. We do not follow the Old Law, and we do not accept it because it belongs to people who are not Christians and violates and trivializes the teachings of Christ. For Christ based his teachings on Moses and the prophets. And he says that he did not come to destroy the Law but to fulfil it (Matthew 5[:17]). And he also instructed his disciples how he had to live and suffer so that the Scriptures would be fulfilled. Christ also did not violate in even the slightest way the Law of Moses. He also added nothing nor took anything away from the Law of Moses. In short, Christ destroyed nothing which pleased God in the Old Law. Christ upheld the letter and spirit of the Old Law. Whoever can join together these two maxims, to wit, We preserve the Law through faith, and Through faith or grace we establish the Law, understands Moses, the prophets, Christ and Paul. As for the claim that the Old Law is not binding, it is too much for me to deal with here, especially since I know the enemies of the Law would not understand me. Therefore I want to reply as follows to the opponent mentioned above: My dear friend, you say that the Old Law forbids images. For that reason you will give them a place in the houses of God and pay little attention to that commandment. Why do you not also say that we are not obligated to honour father and mother because that is forbidden in the Old Law? Moreover, murder, adultery, theft, and similar crimes are forbidden in the same tablets in which images are forbidden. And the commandment forbidding images stands at the head of the list as the principal and greatest one. The commandments forbidding adultery and theft, etc. come after as the lesser and least.

Why do you not also say: We want to permit adultery, theft, murder, and so on in churches because those crimes are forbidden in the Old Law?

Christ shows the Law to him who asks: What should I do that I may have eternal life? Why should I not, in this case, also direct you to the Law of Moses? You say that Isaiah and Jeremiah are evangelical prophets and they forbid images. Why does it annoy you that they forbid images? I say to you that God has forbidden images to no lesser degree and no less expressly than murder, theft, plundering, adultery, and the like.

Finally, you must acknowledge that Paul is a great preacher of the evangelical and New Law. He penetrated the depths of the Mosaic Law and brought it to light. He announced the Christian promise, offering consolation beyond measure. You must also say as follows: if Paul forbids images, I must flee from them. Now listen. Paul says: They have exchanged the splendour of the immortal God not only for the likeness of mortal man but also for images of birds, beasts, and creeping things (Romans 1[:23]). Do you hear how evil and damaging Paul thinks images are? He says that those who praise images steal the splendour of God and offer likenesses of creatures. Therefore they diminish God and scorn him. Therefore, Moses again and again says that God cannot tolerate our images and likenesses. Thus Paul and Moses agree. I have also demonstrated from the Epistles of Paul, cited above, that no one comes to God when he venerates images.

NOTES

[1] The word *bylder* [...] is often rendered as ‘icons’ in English. We have preferred the word ‘images’ for *bylder* because the modern meaning of the word icon is narrower and calls to mind a specifically Byzantine tradition and the images used in the Orthodox Church. [...] [All footnotes taken from: *A Reformation Debate: Karlstadt, Emser, and Eck on Sacred Images. Three Treatises in Translation*, translated by Bryan D. Mangrum and Giuseppe Scavizzi. 2nd ed. rev. Toronto, 1998, pp. 21–42.]

[2]² For Karlstadt to insist on the admission ‘we have loved images’ is in accord with the Erasmian criticism of images, and contrary to the claim of the Catholic theologians that images were seen by people only as signs. [...]

[3]³ The reference is to *ex voto* offerings, often of precious objects, which were left beside images by those who believed that images had conferred some benefit on them.

[4]⁴ Karlstadt does not always distinguish between the issue of images and the cult of the saints. The medieval Church had justified images primarily because they helped the faithful to be mindful of the saints and it is natural therefore that Karlstadt, in his zeal to attack anything that stands between man and God, was sometimes not able to separate the two problems.

[5]⁵ The verses on idolatry in the decalogue (Ex. 20:4–5) were omitted in medieval catechisms because they were believed to apply *exclusively* to the Jews of the Old Testament. Luther accepted this tradition, as did, of course, the Catholic Church. Karlstadt, like Zwingli and Calvin after him, believed instead that the commandment against images was valid for Jews and Christians alike.

[6]⁶ The defence of the cult of images rested traditionally on the idea of vicarious veneration (the image taking the place of the saint as the marshal takes the place of the absent prince). According to this theory any cult directed to the image (as respect shown to the marshal) goes to the saint represented therein, so that the physical object (like the marshal) is not venerated *per se*. This was the doctrine of the prototype as outlined by St Basil.

[7]⁷ The theory of the *Biblia pauperum* was outlined in the writings of John of Damascus, but went back to Gregory I [images are the Bible of the poor].

[8]⁸ The brazen serpent, the cherubim of the mercy seat and the images of the Temple of Solomon were for the Catholic theologians clear proof that God approved images. Karlstadt, needless to say, mentions the serpent only to record its destruction at the hands of Hezekiah.

[9]⁹ An allusion to the popular belief that gazing upon an image of St Christopher assured one of not dying in mortal sin during that day [...].

[10]¹⁰ The reference is to someone in Wittenberg, not necessarily a woman, who wanted to protect and defend images.

[11]¹¹ The brazen serpent.

[12]¹² Karlstadt advocates an orderly removal of images regulated by the secular authorities, which, in fact, was being done in Wittenberg under the ordinances issued by the city council [...].

Source of the original German text: Andreas Karlstadt, *Von Abtuhung der Bilder und das keyn Bedtler vnther den Christen seyn sollen 1522 und die Wittenberger Beutelordnung*, edited by Hans Lietzmann. Bonn, 1911, pp. 4–22. Available online at: <http://digital.bib-bvb.de/publish/content/18/13207686.html>.

Source of English translation: *A Reformation Debate: Karlstadt, Emser, and Eck on Sacred Images. Three Treatises in Translation*, translated by Bryan D. Mangrum and Giuseppe Scavizzi. 2nd ed. rev. Toronto, 1998, pp. 21–42.

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