

Chapter 9: Veneration of Holy Icons

“You shall not make for yourself a carved image—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, visiting the iniquity of the fathers upon the children to the third and fourth generations of those who hate Me, but showing mercy to thousands, to those who love Me and keep My commandments.”¹

“Christ came to save us from every kind of worship and ministry to the creation and things made by human hands, yet they do turn it all around, so that you are forced to bow down before things made by human hands. To make matters even worse and more grievous, including the canine head of Saint Christopher, you must also bow down to it. This also includes the Most Blessed Saving Mother with her three hands! What in nature would be considered a monster (God forbid!), they force you to worship its icon! It is to this extent, my dear brothers, that blindness and superstition have come and overwhelmed us!”²

One of the typical emerging practices of Eastern Orthodox Christianity is icon painting and veneration of holy iconography (icons). As the case with many other Orthodox beliefs, especially with regard to veneration of icons, it is very easy through the light of Scripture to demonstrate that God’s Word condemns this belief as sinful and forbids such practice in numerous ways. However, theologians of the Orthodox Church use the influence of “sacred tradition” to condemn the narrow evangelical Christians (whom they deem as sectarian) because they reject icons. Such Orthodox theologians in Serbia and other traditionally Orthodox countries condemn Christians who teach the Bible forbids icon veneration by claiming that such teaching has made a very detrimental impact in relations between Protestants and Orthodox:

“The negative impact of foreign religions on Orthodoxy here has been hateful and detrimental. **Protestants** of all confessional forms and offshoots simply reject to ascribe any religious significance to icons. They base their rejection on an apostate theological spirituality that removes any sense of prayer and worship. **On this issue**, as well as many others, **they are perishing in their outdated iconoclastic-dogmatic delusions.**”³

“Sects, whose main characteristic is the rejection of Orthodoxy as national Christianity, formally war against icons in a perfidious, sometimes brutal, yet quite effective manner, as there are believers who, because they are uninformed and lack religious education, are vulnerable to **their clever, though still shallow and banal anti-ecclesiastical misrepresentations**. Sects, just like the ancient iconoclasts, **base their positions on theological negativity and drought**. Taking the Bible to drive home their points of

¹ Exodus 20:4-6.

² Dositej Obradovic, *Collected Works*, 594-5.

³ Bozhidar Milach, *Icons Holy Images* (Belgrade, 1997), 9. Author’s emphasis.

propaganda, these sectarians reject the authority of the Church and her sacred tradition and thus deprive themselves of the grace of the Holy Spirit. They misuse this holy Book for antibiblical purposes. One gains the impression from the sectarians' rage that iconoclasm (angry war against icons) becomes the main passion throughout sectarian religions.”⁴

As we just read, Protestant (and evangelical) Christians are sectarians who are “perishing in their outdated iconoclastic-dogmatic delusions” and use the Bible for “antibiblical” purposes. In other words, they have no strong arguments to defend their “still shallow and banal anti-ecclesiastical misrepresentations”. However, we will examine these issues systematically, including the origin, nature and significance of icons. Without too much difficulty, we will arrive at the conclusion that the veneration of icons is still a very antibiblical doctrine and practice. We will examine this topic both in this chapter as well as the chapter on the Ecumenical Councils (especially pertaining to the Seventh Ecumenical Council).

The Veneration of Icons in Eastern Orthodoxy

In order for a meticulously composed image to become a religious icon, it must go through the act of christening called consecration. Not every piece of artwork can be called an icon, but only those that resemble the original icon or image that represents. Also, any characters portrayed on the walls of churches (fresco) do not merit to be considered icons, and thus do not “merit” the veneration owed to consecrated images:

“In order for an icon to truly be considered an icon, the image must undergo holy christening, which we know is called consecration... The image, as such, corresponds to the archetype and thus is made holy. The icon possesses a visible natural power of character thanks to its relationship with its archetype. Sacred wall paintings, or frescoes, lack this force with distinctive clarity neither do they have any capacity for veneration (placing candles or kissing them)... So that is why we do not ascribe to every image or icon the power of iconostasis, **unless it has been consecrated**. Therefore it is impossible to venerate icons that have never been consecrated.”⁵

Therefore, according to Sergei Bulgakov, no matter how highly people might cherish the significance of icons, their significance is still limited. The icon serves as a place of encounter with the divine. However, “while icons are not always a necessary condition to conduct a prayer encounter, **they can serve as a tool to aid prayer**.”⁶

Thus, the very icon serves as a tool for prayer, although it is quite possible to pray without it. After all, as we shall see later, the early Christians in the first centuries of Christianity conducted their prayer life quite well without icons, which of course proves to us that they are not necessary for good fellowship with the Lord.

⁴ *Ibid.*, 12-13. Author's emphasis.

⁵ Sergei Bulgakov, *Icons and Icon Veneration*, (Belgrade, 1998), 76-7. Author's emphasis.

⁶ *Ibid.*, 82. Author's emphasis.

The Seventh Ecumenical Council in 8th Century A.D. permitted the making of icons, including icons of Christ, the Virgin Mary, angels and all saints, in the church. According to Bulgakov, although the Seventh Ecumenical Council did not mention anything specifically regarding the icon of the Holy Trinity, nor did the Council anticipate such a work being invented, the Eastern Orthodox Church legalized its existence. The icon of the divine Trinity depicts the image of God the Father, God the Son, and God the Holy Spirit with two techniques. One technique uses the form of the three angels who appeared to Abraham on the plain of Mamre in Genesis 18. The figure in the middle depicts God the Father as the Angel of the Lord. A second technique portrays an icon of the divine Trinity with God the Father in the form of an old man, the Son of the form of a young man, and the Holy Spirit in the form of a dove. (Another icon depicts the descent of the Holy Spirit upon the Apostles as a divine figure in the form of fiery tongues.)⁷

Although in fact, they fell down and worshiped before the icons of the Orthodox to worship God, the following quotation from the Seventh Ecumenical Council reveals that the church fathers sought to avoid the accusation of idolatry and attempted to make a distinction between icon veneration and idolatry:

“The consecrated icon of Christ for us is Christ Himself in his character, as He is present with us in His name. The icon is a manifestation of Christ, our prayer encounter with Him. Praying before the icon, we make petition directly to Him; when we kiss the icon, we have kissed Him; when we bow down before the icon, we bow down before Him.”⁸

So it is important to point out that Orthodox theology distinguishes between two types of worship. One type is rendered to God Himself, and a second type relates to the veneration of icons. The Orthodox Church uses two dogmatic words from the Greek: “latreia” which relates to worship of God and “proskunesis” which applies to the veneration of icons. A future chapter will elaborate on how the Seventh Ecumenical Council arrived at its decisions. For now, though, it is very important to deal with the issue of how traditional Christianity in the East justified iconostasis and icon veneration in light of Holy Scriptures. Explanations such as those earlier cited that icons serve as a tool for prayer might be acceptable to some people. However, the major question still remains. Does the Bible give a sound basis for icon veneration? The next section will assist us to form a proper answer from God’s Word.

Eastern Orthodoxy’s Explanation of the Second Commandment

The Orthodox Church defends its belief in icons from a rather peculiar interpretation of the other commandments of God. Orthodoxy also attempts to justify icons with other events in the Old and New Testament. Orthodoxy even goes to the extreme of claiming the Bible mandates the veneration of icons. In fact, during the consecration, that is, the sacred christening, of icons, as the Orthodox priest confirms the identity of the icon with its prototype (the personage portrayed), the ceremony endows the icon as a place of grace

⁷ *Ibid.*, 84-5.

⁸ *Ibid.*, 80.

with the presence of saints by whose name the icon is called.⁹ The following excerpt explains this concept:

“At the beginning of the ritual prayer, in his address to God, the Orthodox priest stresses **that God has forbidden men from making idols**. ‘You have commanded his ban to produce images and pictures, which do not please You, righteous God, in order that we might not bow down to them nor worship them.’ After repeating this statement, the priest refers to the fact that God commanded ‘that man cannot draw pictures that will glorify the name of foreign and strange gods that do not exist, but let Thy name, the name of the only true God, be exalted as the most holy of all the names.’”¹⁰

Lazar Milin claims that God commanded people to make and use icons in worship:

“Not only does the Bible not prohibit the creation of icons, but indeed the Bible gives a direct command from God to create images and icons for the purpose of worship! God even showed Moses how the image should look!

‘Then the LORD spoke to Moses, saying: ‘Speak to the children of Israel... And let them make Me a sanctuary, that I may dwell among them. According to all that I show you, that is, the pattern of the tabernacle and the pattern of all its furnishings, just so you shall make it. And they shall make an ark of acacia wood... And you shall overlay it with pure gold, inside and out you shall overlay it, and shall make on it a molding of gold all around... And you shall make two cherubim of gold; of hammered work you shall make them at the two ends of the mercy seat... And there I will meet with you, and I will speak with you from above the mercy seat, from between the two cherubim which are on the ark of the Testimony.’ (Exodus 25:1-22)

‘You shall make a veil woven of blue, purple, and scarlet thread, and fine woven linen. It shall be woven with an artistic design of cherubim.’ (Exodus 26:31)

So, not only has God not forbidden making religious images for religious purposes, but, on the contrary, God commands it!”¹¹

Therefore, according to Orthodox teaching, God in the second commandment prohibited the making of images and their use in the liturgy - the first expression of iconography.¹²

⁹ This stems from the Orthodox teaching that claims dead saints actually are still alive. Orthodoxy teaches that deceased saints can hear the prayers of people still alive on the earth and mediate them to God. Importantly, the Eastern Orthodox Church believes that the dead saints are present in their icons.

¹⁰ Ernst Benz, *The Spirit and Life of the Orthodox Church*, 15-6. Author’s emphasis. First Elder of the Serbian Orthodox Church Bozidar Mijac in his book *Icons Light of the World* among other things said this: “The situation is similar to the Old Testament prohibitions on icon painting, where it overlooks the fact that these bans, like many others in the Old Testament, had only a **temporary meaning**. These prohibitions were directed only to keep the Jews from worshiping false gods and idols. **This prohibition does not apply to Christians** who are freed from idolatry by Christ’s redemption.” 68-69. Author’s emphasis.

¹¹ Lazar Milin, *Church and Sects*, 343-5. Author’s emphasis.

¹² See Benz, 16.

Orthodoxy considers this command to have applied only to making idols to pagan deities. Yet, such a conclusion is not feasible. The second commandment has a broader application of its meaning, as we will demonstrate later.

Bulgakov in his work even admits that the commandment given to Moses regarding the building of the golden cherubim in the Tabernacle was a limited exception to God's commandments prohibiting the depiction of personages – “those that bore only conditional and pedagogic significance.”¹³

Let us now compare the claims of Orthodoxy with the truth of Holy Scripture.

The Teaching of Holy Scripture on Veneration of Icons

The careful reader of the second commandment of God quoted at the beginning of this chapter cannot find any way to arrive at the same interpretation as did the theologians of the Orthodox Church. Although the Israelites at the time of Moses knew nothing of what we call the icons of Christian saints, but only were familiar with the idols and images of Egyptian deities (presented in the forms of humans, animals, or half-men, half-animals), the Lord did not limit this command solely to painting and worshipping idols. This commandment, as we shall see, included all creatures that dwell in the expanse of heaven (angelic beings), the earth (all living creatures and the inanimate world), and water. Above all, this commandment pertained to the Lord (Yahweh) God. He forbade His people to worship Him like pagan gods, whom people depicted in pictures and worshiped. Moses conveyed the Lord's message in these words:

*“Now, O Israel, listen to the statutes and the judgments which I teach you to observe... You shall not add to the word which I command you, nor take from it, that you may keep the commandments of the LORD your God which I command you... And the LORD spoke to you out of the midst of the fire. You heard the sound of the words, **but saw no form** ... Take careful heed to yourselves, **for you saw no form** when the LORD spoke to you at Horeb out of the midst of the fire, **lest you act corruptly and make for yourselves a carved image in the form of any figure: the likeness of male or female**...”¹⁴*

The meaning of the second commandment mentioned above is expressed in such strong terms that God intends this commandment to be obeyed by the true worshiper for all times. The Word of God is like God in that it is absolutely immutable. However, contrary to the clear revelation of the Word of God that the second commandment of God must be obeyed literally by all generations of true believers in God, the traditional Eastern Orthodox (and Roman Catholic) Church has changed its meaning through misinterpreting the commandment. This misinterpretation emerged due to the influence of non-Christian philosophy that replaced the system of Christian theology in the first centuries after Christ. Evidence for the development of such non-Christian philosophy that had a crucial impact on iconography and icon veneration manifests itself in the writings of Orthodox authors. In fact, as we will demonstrate, Greek philosophical

¹³ Bulgakov, 9.

¹⁴ Deuteronomy 4:1-2, 12, 15-6. Author's emphasis.

thought is the “culprit” for the invention of icon veneration and the very idea that an icon could be a place for transmitting grace through the presence of the person which it represented. Additionally, this same Greek philosophy also is responsible for the idea that prayer, worship and kissing icons equates to veneration of the person painted and, ultimately, therefore the divine essence.

Here are some Orthodox writers who support these claims:

“In the history of icon veneration, we admit above all to the basic fact that icons originated in paganism. The entire pagan world was full of icons and icon veneration.”¹⁵

“Along with its highest achievements, Greek philosophy **appeared in Christianity before the time of Christ**. On that basis, Greek philosophy became the natural language for Christian revelation and theology, as well as the revelation of ancient art in iconography with some, although limited, meaning in **Christianity before the time of Christ**. Without a doubt, Greek philosophy spawned a prototype of Christian icons... **and as one would logically expect, the Christian church changed the content of iconic depictions, although it still adopted the principles of icons**. This became the bridge between pagan iconography and Christian art... Coincidentally, the ideal forms to paint were pure humans, which were needed in Christian iconography and were found even in pagan art. This does not mean, of course, that Christian iconography simply copied pagan icons. Rather, Christian iconography imprinted its own stamp. **However, this does not diminish the fact that pagan iconography**, as it were, was **as natural in the Old Testament before Christianity** in the same way as pagan philosophy appears in the Old Testament before Christian theology.”¹⁶

It is very important to note that Orthodox theology recognizes that the theology of icons does not originate from Scripture, but rather from Greek Neo-Platonist philosophy that is foreign to Christianity. Here is what some of the great scholars of Orthodox theology say:

“Other opponents object to images by alleging that veneration of images deprives God of the worship that only He deserves. Defenders of icons have a completely different understanding of images. **Their understanding developed from the thinking of Neo-platonism regarding pictorial representation**: ‘We do not ascribe to icons divine properties, but we know that veneration shown to icons rise to its prototype.’ Not the image, but the subject, is the recipient of prayer, its prototype that 'appears' in the icon.”¹⁷

¹⁵ Bulgakov, 6.

¹⁶ *Ibid.*, 8. Author’s emphasis.

¹⁷ Benz, *Spirit and Life of the Eastern Church*, 16. Author’s emphasis. This statement by the Orthodox author certainly proves that the idea of expressing veneration for the saints through an icon and praying before them could not be found on the pages of Scripture, nor could it be affirmed by the spirit of Christ's teachings. On the other hand we understand that this idea is adapted from the ideology alleged to exist in the “Old Testament” for Orthodox theologians, but in reality is merely Greek philosophy and religion.

“Everyone usually agrees that the theological defense of the Holy Icons, particularly the defense of St. Theodore and before him St. John of Damascus, is based upon Neo-Platonist assumptions. The whole concept of ‘images’ (which refers to a lower level) came from Platonic philosophy. Taken as a whole, this view was correct... Now let us learn about iconophilia (love of icons). We admit that it is Platonic or at least Neo-Platonist... Proponents of icons undoubtedly were Platonists.”¹⁸

So we realize that “Christian” (read: Eastern Orthodox and Roman Catholic) iconography and icon veneration derive from ancient Greek philosophy and religion instead of the Holy Scriptures that contain Christ’s teachings and practices. We now can understand how it is that on the front side of Orthodox churches are found frescoes painted by “Christians before the time of Christ”, such as the pagan philosophers Socrates, Plato, Aristotle, Ptolemy, Sybil and others¹⁹, who have contributed significantly to this apostasy in Christianity from the truth revealed in God’s Holy Word.

The fact that icon veneration does not come from the Bible will now be demonstrated in the next section, which examines the purpose for making the image of angelic cherubim in the Old Testament tabernacle.

Cherubim in the Tabernacle and the Jerusalem Temple

What was the purpose of making the two-dimensional and three-dimensional sculptures of cherubim (including both woven figures in the curtains and golden statues) in the worship buildings of the Old Testament? Did God actually revoke the command He had given earlier by commanding Moses to make the images for the purpose of performing worship rites? Sergey Bulgakov gives an explanation with which evangelical Christians would agree:

“Apologists in favor of icon veneration invoke in their debates the images of the two cherubs to argue against iconoclasts who look to Judaism to support their position of a literal interpretation of the second commandment. However, these cherub images appear as a recognition in principle of the rights and opportunities for religious art, including the depiction of the spiritual world in art figures, though such artistic expression is pedagogical and limited in quantity. **In addition, it should be recognized that the permission of portraying angels does not equate to icon veneration.**”²⁰

As we will see later, Orthodox theologians admit that the angelic figures by no means ever served as objects of veneration by Old Testament saints (as a matter of fact, only the priests could enter the tabernacle, while the rest of the people remained outside). The Old Testament records nothing about saints falling down, venerating the angels, or burning candles or incense before them (as is the case with icon veneration in the Eastern Orthodox Church). The woven and gold-plated figures of cherubs served merely for

¹⁸ Georgi Florovskiy, *Christianity and Culture*, (The Orthodox Word: Belgrade, 1995) 99, 101. Author’s emphasis.

¹⁹ See Bulgakov, 97.

²⁰ Bulgakov, 10. Author’s emphasis.

illustration of symbolism, which is supposed to reflect an image of a hidden spiritual reality.²¹

Today's evangelical Protestants have also allowed for artistic illustration of a wide variety of events found in the Bible in publications. However, evangelical Christians do not worship nor minister to these pictures in any way nor do they believe that the picture truly represents the person who is portrayed. They say that God in the second commandment did not forbid making fine art and illustration of symbols indicating the existence of the spiritual world (which is proved by the Lord's commandment for depicting the cherubs). However, the Lord in the second commandment does forbid "worshiping and serving"²² the images produced to be used in religious rites, such as the commandment clearly indicates. In fact, if God's commandment were to include a general ban of depicting all the things He has created, then it would include the prohibition of fine arts (painting natural things both living and dead), taking photographs, making feature films, documentaries, cartoons, movies, etc., which certainly is not the case. Bulgakov elaborates on the question of why and in what sense the Old Testament allowed the depiction of angels, which usually evokes no great discord neither from proponents of icon veneration nor their opponents.²³

The next section will examine Old Testament passages having direct and unequivocal links to how the Lord ordained the design of the cherub images in the Tabernacle (and later the Temple in Jerusalem).

²¹ However, not all Orthodox authors agree that the Old Testament regulations about making angelic images and other symbols lend no support to icon veneration practiced within Orthodoxy. For example, Justin Popovic associates God's commandments (which determined the mode of Old Testament worship) with the practice done for centuries in the Orthodox churches: "Veneration for the holy icon in prayer is not only consistent with divine revelation but also stems from it as its original source... Prayer incense before the holy icon is based on the direct commandments of God to Aaron to place incense on the golden altar before the Ark of the Covenant, and to anoint every morning with fragrant incense the Ark of the Covenant and the cherubs, as well as the curtain in front of the Ark of the Covenant. At the same time, God commanded him to burn incense and candles before the holy icons." *Doctrines of the Orthodox Church III*, (Valjevo, 2004), 686-687. The quote just cited above alleges that the Lord commanded the burning of incense and candles before the icons of the cherubim angels in the Tabernacle. Although this statement is somewhat true, it requires further clarification. In fact, as I mentioned in the chapter on the sacraments (sacred sacraments of the clergy), the entire Old Testament system of worship was an important symbol of the spiritual reality revealed in Christ. The seven-fold golden candlestick which burns from evening to morning (Exodus 25:31, 37) symbolized the light that comes from the "seven flames of fire" that rise up to God's throne in heaven (which symbolizes the Holy Spirit; see Rev. 1:4, 4:5). The golden altar of incense, from which the smoke of incense rises toward the temple curtain (Ex. 40:26-27) symbolizes the prayers of God's people (Rev. 8:3-4). In any case, the burning candlestick and the smoke of incense were never offered by the priest as a sign of veneration for the angelic beings themselves, but rather the Lord God Who is highly exalted (and before whom the seraphim and cherubim cover their faces and eyes, as they considered themselves unworthy to gaze upon God's exalted glory - Isaiah 6:1-4).

²² See Exodus 22:5.

²³ Bulgakov, 10.

Image (Type) of the Heavenly Reality

There is great biblical truth in the aphorism that “the New Testament is concealed in the Old Testament, while the Old Testament is revealed in the New Testament.” Many prophecies, and the deep spiritual meaning of religious rites, holidays and symbolism of the Old Testament, found their fulfillment in Christ and the reality of the New Testament. Here are some texts that address this symbolism (typology):

*“And the cherubim shall stretch out their wings above, covering the mercy seat with their wings, and they shall face one another; the faces of the cherubim shall be toward the mercy seat. You shall put the mercy seat on top of the ark, and in the ark you shall put the Testimony that I will give you. **And there I will meet with you, and I will speak with you from above the mercy seat, from between the two cherubim** which are on the ark of the Testimony, about everything which I will give you in commandment to the children of Israel.”*²⁴

*“And the LORD said to Moses: “Tell Aaron your brother not to come at just any time into the Holy Place inside the veil, before the mercy seat which is on the ark, lest he die; **for I will appear in the cloud above the mercy seat.**”*²⁵

*“Now when Moses went into the tabernacle of meeting to speak with Him, **he heard the voice of One speaking to him from above the mercy seat** that was on the ark of the Testimony, **from between the two cherubim**; thus He spoke to him.”*²⁶

*“Then the cloud covered the tabernacle of meeting, and the glory of the LORD filled the tabernacle. And Moses was not able to enter the tabernacle of meeting, because the cloud rested above it, and the glory of the LORD filled the tabernacle.”*²⁷

*“Also King Solomon, and all the congregation of Israel who were assembled with him, were with him before the ark, sacrificing sheep and oxen that could not be counted or numbered for multitude. Then the priests brought in the ark of the covenant of the LORD to its place, into the inner sanctuary of the temple, to the Most Holy Place, under the wings of the cherubim... And it came to pass, when the priests came out of the holy place, **that the cloud filled the house of the LORD**, so that the priests could not continue ministering because of the cloud; **for the glory of the LORD filled the house of the LORD.**”*²⁸

According to the Old Testament passages just quoted, the tabernacle of meeting, and later the Jerusalem temple, were supposed to be where God met with His people, that is, the priests who were His representatives and intercessors for the people of Israel. The Holy of Holies, where the Ark containing the Ten Commandments was placed, was a

²⁴ Exodus 25:20-22. Author’s emphasis.

²⁵ Leviticus 16:2. Author’s emphasis.

²⁶ Numbers 7:89. Author’s emphasis.

²⁷ Exodus 40:34-5.

²⁸ 1 Kings 8:5-6, 10-11. Author’s emphasis.

place of special grace of the Lord's presence. His cloud of glory which appeared over the cover of the Ark between the two cherubs was proof of His presence among His people. Only the High Priest every year could offer the blood of pure animals slaughtered as a sacrifice for the sins of the people in that location (upon the lid of the golden Ark). In this symbolic way, the Old Testament high priest, a prototype of the Savior Jesus Christ, offers a vicarious blood sacrifice for the redemption of sin in the Lord's presence only (i.e., before God's throne in heaven). The prophet Isaiah wrote this about his heavenly vision that he was in the Jerusalem Temple:

*“In the year that King Uzziah died, I saw the Lord sitting on a throne, high and lifted up, and the train of His robe filled the temple. Above it stood seraphim; each one had six wings: with two he covered his face, with two he covered his feet, and with two he flew. And one cried to another and said: ‘Holy, holy, holy is the LORD of hosts; The whole earth is full of His glory!’ And the posts of the door were shaken by the voice of him who cried out, and the house was filled with smoke.”*²⁹

The visions of the prophets clearly revealed the reality of the spiritual world, which the Holy of Holies displayed with symbolic objects. The Lord's throne in heaven was surrounded by heavenly angels who continually worship the Creator. Since the tent of meeting should be a picture of the heavenly realm, the third heaven where is located the famous throne of the Lord (2 Cor. 12:2-4, 1 Timothy 6:16), the cherubim woven in the curtains in the Holy of Holies should help people on earth to envision the heavenly angelic presence before the place where the Lord reigns supremely. It is quite clear that the angelic images in the Jewish temple were not placed in a position where people could pray to them, bow down, burn incense to them, nor render any other worship rite. (The Old Testament texts clearly as well as the practice of worship in the Old Testament demonstrate this point.) It is impossible to equate the use of the angelic images in the Old Testament with the veneration of icons existing in the Eastern Orthodox Church for the simple reason that they each served very different purposes.³⁰

Before we see what was the actual beginning of iconography and icon veneration from church history, which will help us once again confirm the truth of what evangelical Christians believe, I would like to briefly deal with the teachings of sacred tradition of Orthodoxy regarding the subject.

What Sacred Tradition Teaches on Icons

“The Church teaches that iconography, the painting of icons, has existed since the beginning of Christianity, and as we shall later explain in more detail, even the direct expression of the Incarnation. Iconography, in this respect, corresponds to revelation, which is not only transmitted through the Word of God, but also the image of God (Philippians 2:6-7, Galatians 3:24-25, 4:3). The formal Old Testament “banning” of making images indicates that the gap was redeemed by the holy images of the New

²⁹ Isaiah 6:1-4.

³⁰ Regarding the actual symbolism of the tabernacle and the Old Testament priesthood, please read the section on “Sacrament of the Priesthood” in the chapter “Seven Sacred Sacraments”.

Testament. This, as a confirmation and illustration, serves well the **liturgical tradition** of the so-called church icons ‘made without human hands’, i.e., **icons that were painted by the person himself** or someone else who bore his character. Such an icon of Christ was given by Christ Himself to King Abgar V of Edessa with the miraculous towel which embodied His image. This icon highlights the parallel existence of the church and iconography. **The Church never existed without icons:** as soon as the Church began to preach, the Church also began to paint. **Even the Holy Apostle Luke was a painter and, according to tradition, painted images of Christ and the Virgin Mary.”**³¹

“**Icons have been used in the church from the beginning of Christianity.** The first icon was the image of the Lord Jesus Christ. **Church tradition tells us** that this icon came about in a miraculous way. King Abgar V of Edessa heard of Christ, his teachings, and miracles that he did. He desired to see the famous Miracle Worker, but serious illness prevented him from doing so. So he invited the Lord himself to visit Edessa. The Lord declined the invitation because He was about to fulfill the plan of redemption among the Jews in Palestine. Abgar V of Edessa then found painters whom he sent to Jesus with the task of painting His picture on canvas. The painter went to Jesus, found Him, and started to paint His portrait but had no success. The painting of the face of the Lord Jesus differed quite a bit from the actual Person and did not give a true representation. To comfort the frustrated painters and its sender, the Lord took a clean towel, wiped it on Himself, and **left on the towel the image of His face.** This towel bearing the image of Christ was made without human hands. The painters delivered the image to King Abgar V of Edessa who joyfully received it, kissed the image, and was healed of his maladies.

Christian **tradition** bears witness to another image of the Lord Jesus that was not made by human hands in the same manner, just under different circumstances. When Pilate convicted the Lord, he ordered Him to be crucified at Golgotha. As Jesus labored His way there, He stumbled and fell due to the heavy weight of the cross and pain from the previous torture in prison. He fell down on His divine face which gushed sweat and blood from the crown of thorns put on His head when He was beaten. One of the women on the street watched the sad procession. In compassion, she gave the Lord a clean towel to wipe his face. **Her compassion was rewarded by the Lord, who left the imprint of His face on the towel.** **Tradition** tells us this woman was named Veronica.

The earliest icon of the Holy Mother of God, **again according to church tradition,** was made by the holy Apostle and Evangelist Luke. She approved and blessed the icon. Church **tradition** says that St. Luke made three icons of the Holy Mother of God and that one of them is in our Chilandar monastery in Mount Athos. St. Sava found one of these icons on his travels to the East, purchased it, and brought it to Chilandar.”³²

These quotes from Orthodox sources teach that the Eastern Orthodox churches believe that icons date back to the very beginning of Christianity, based solely on tradition. Neither Christ nor the apostles mention anything in God’s inspired Word about the

³¹ Mijac, 18-9. Author’s emphasis.

³² Zhivan Marinkovic, *The Greatest Teacher*, 65-6. Author’s emphasis.

emergence of the first icons. Moreover, the story told by sacred tradition assigns to Christ the role of the first iconographer in the New Testament era, as it claims in the tale of King Abgar V of Edessa, who introduced icon veneration (since Abgar V of Edessa kissed the icon made without human hands), the same sort that exists today in Orthodoxy. Also, as we have seen, sacred tradition declares Evangelist Luke to be an iconographer, whose icons were blessed by the holy Mother of God. So why is it that Luke says nothing about this in the book of Acts? If the story of Luke as a maker of icons were true, undoubtedly, he would have written it down with his pen. All of Christianity since the earliest times would have made it clear that icon veneration in the Church was permitted, in spite of the prohibition in the Old Testament. However, these ideas remain in the domain of pure theory, for the simple reason that God's second commandment, the prohibition for the Jews to make images and venerate them, was a part of God's law that was intended to be obeyed for all time. Specifically, Christ said:

*“Do not think that I came to destroy the Law or the Prophets. **I did not come to destroy but to fulfill.** For assuredly, I say to you, till heaven and earth pass away, one jot or one tittle will by no means pass from the law till all is fulfilled.”*³³

For Christ to fulfill the law, it could certainly not imply a direct violation of one of God's commandments, which forbade the “adoration and veneration” of images. Such would not have been the case had it been true that Christ produced not just one but two icons not made by human hands, before which a person could bow down. Otherwise, Christ Himself would be unable to claim what we have just read in the Gospel of Matthew.

With regard, on the other hand, to the icon of the Blessed Virgin, we examined the issue in the chapter on Mary. History attests to the fact that these icons mentioned here were produced only in the early fourth century A.D. under the influence of the cult of the Mother Goddess resulting from pagan religions and cultures.

In order to clarify the controversy as to whether or not the early Christian Church venerated icons, which neither Christ nor the apostles taught in their doctrine, let us now examine the indisputable facts of history.

What Does Church History Say about Icon Veneration?

The first undisputed fact is that there existed no iconography in the Apostolic Church of the first century. Neither did the early church know anything about the legends of icons of Christ not made by human hands, nor icons of the Virgin Mary. Despite sacred tradition's tales that icons existed from the very beginning of the church era, reliable sources negate this claim and utterly contradict sacred tradition. Sergei Bulgakov comments on this topic:

“The Christian Church came from Judaism - as something which is obvious and possessed the force of law - and inherited the **ban on religious iconography**. In that sense, **the Church in the beginning was very iconoclastic.**”³⁴

³³ Matthew 5:17-8. Author's emphasis.

If we accept this claim of this famous Russian Orthodox theologian as true, then it certainly raises a big question. How was it possible that the first century Church was iconoclastic (e.g., the Church opposed icons) if everyone had known that Christ had blessed His image on the canvas and towels presented for people to venerate? How would it have been possible if the evangelist Luke were to have painted icons (and not just one but several), yet at that time, the entire Church still possessed an iconoclastic spirit? The answers to these questions are more than clear and obvious.

From another perspective, here is an even more extensive description of this early Church era that concurs with the statement earlier given by Bulgakov. The following quote comes from the book of an Orthodox author, this time an expert historian:

“As the church entered the end of the first period³⁵, the church first began to use pictures symbolically, and only images that portrayed people or events. However these were used **very rarely and with great reluctance**, for many of the first Christians came out of Judaism, which we know that in later times all the way up to the fifth century A.D. obeyed the Old Testament commandment in this regard.

The Synod of Elvira at Iliberus in Spain (306) **banned images painted on walls of church buildings.**

The church historian **Eusebius** (died 340), who was Bishop of Caesarea in Palestine, was a contemporary of the above-mentioned Synod. He was a devout man who deemed religious images as **mimicking pagan customs**. (As a footnote, Constantina, the sister of Constantine the Great, asked Eusebius for a picture of Jesus. Eusebius responds that religious images are **pagan customs**. In his ecclesiastical history which he wrote, Eusebius speaks of a statue of Christ in Caesarea Philippi, which a woman erected there in his hometown. She claimed to have been cured by Christ of hemophilia, but he says this story was only transmitted second-hand.³⁶ Even if this story were true, Eusebius considered this woman to definitely have been a pagan.)

But as we mentioned earlier, the custom began and gained momentum later on. By the end of the fourth century, icons became quite widespread, although it remained the case that **church leaders did not encourage their use. Either they totally condemned the use of religious images and icons, or else they considered religious images to be a dangerous habit.**

Among the most determined opponents of religious images and icons was the early church father **Epiphanius** (died 403) at the end of the fourth century. He was from

³⁴ Bulgakov, 10. Author’s emphasis.

³⁵ Translator’s note: the name “first period” refers to the period of church history from the Ascension of Christ in the Book of Acts until the Edict of Milan in 313 A.D. when the Roman Emperor Constantine granted toleration to the Christian Church. “The first period of Christian history, extending from the day of Pentecost to the conversion of Constantine, has a special relevance for contemporary Orthodoxy.” Timothy Ware, *The Orthodox Church*, http://www.fatheralexander.org/booklets/english/history_timothy_ware_1.htm .

³⁶ Author’s note: that is, it was a legend, not verifiable history

Palestine and a descendant of the tribe of Judah. He died as a church metropolitan in either Salamis or Constantia in Cyprus. His antipathy toward icons went to such an extreme that one time, when he found **an icon painted on the canvas near a church door**, Epiphanius **tore it down, ripped it into pieces**, and gave it to a church minister to **bury the destroyed icon with a dead body**.

But conditions changed in the fifth and sixth centuries. The use of icons found more and more allies and became common in churches, except in the Nestorian church, which wanted to retain the ancient customs and raised opposition in this matter vs. the other churches. Moreover, in the East at the end of the second period, icon veneration had also spread as people venerated icons through sacrifices, kisses, incense, burning candles, etc... **And in the East, the icons first served merely as religious monuments and teaching aids. Only over time did the Eastern Church's use of icons evolve into veneration of the icons**, the person whom the icon represents.”³⁷

Let us summarize a few main points from this passage:

1. At the start of the Christian era during the time of the apostles and their successors in the first century A.D., the Church did not use any religious images.
2. The first religious images, which only had symbolic and illustrative significance, began to be introduced at the end of the “first period”, i.e., probably in the third century A.D.³⁸ Such art was used only for religious instruction (such as frescoes and contemporary works of art, illustrated editions of Scripture, and pictures with the biblical themes).
3. The introduction of other images (iconography of “saints” and others) initially encountered fierce opposition from many church leaders.
4. Some of the major opponents of iconography and icon veneration included Eusebius, the famous historian of the early Church, the bishop of Caesarea in Palestine, and the Metropolitan Epiphanius.
5. Even one local church council (in Elvira in 306 A.D. during Diocletian's persecution of Christians) decided to ban interior painting in church buildings.³⁹
6. In the fifth and sixth century A.D., iconography began to grow in popularity, such that by the end of the “Second Period”, i.e., the end of the sixth and early seventh centuries, icon veneration (which includes veneration of icons in the form of teaching people to kiss, burn incense, and light candles to icons).

³⁷ Eusebius Popovic, *General Church History*, Vol. 1, 652-3. Author's emphasis.

³⁸ Regarding images, Bulgakov writes: “The history of icon veneration say this gives the artwork. The earliest paintings (from Roman catacombs) are timid and primitive allegorical-symbolic characters (goats, lambs, doves, fish, and grapes). Later, they are joined by some typical images that echo the themes of the Old and New Testament (Noah's ark, Daniel, Jonah, Moses, who strikes the rock to find water, the Good Shepherd carrying a lamb, wise and foolish virgins, etc.). Bulgakov, 11.

³⁹ Today's defenders of icon veneration who subscribe to the so-called “decree” of the Seventh Ecumenical Council claim that the ban on painting icons by the Synod of Elvira was not binding on the church in general but rather only had local authority (Mijac, *Icons Pictures of the World*, 26) though the fact remains that at the time when the Synod of Elvira convened (more than three centuries before the Seventh Ecumenical Council), its findings were a true reflection of the attitude of the church at large toward icons (according to many, including Eusebius Popovic). Thus, its decisions can be considered binding on the church at large, including the universal church in the early fourth century.

7. Icon veneration as what we find today in Eastern Orthodoxy developed gradually over several centuries from the creation of the original art form of depicting symbolic images, including the representation of vineyards, fish, doves, etc. By no means was icon veneration part of the religious practices of believers in the first centuries of Christianity.

We have already determined that iconography and icon veneration are based on Greek religious and philosophical thought. Eusebius Popovic adds further confirmation to this fact as he narrates about the external and internal appearance of liturgical (i.e., worship) places:

“At first, there were no icons⁴⁰, for the Jews prohibited religious images. **However, little by little**, gospel freedom allowed **in some places** the first use of symbolic imagery... Finally, the pagan trend toward images prevailed over the Jewish banning of images, such as those images depicting historical imagery; such were icons of Jesus as a babe in the arms of His mother⁴¹... **But the majority of church teachers did not approve of religious images (icons)** during the end of this (first) period: the Synod of Elvira (Iliberis) in Spain in 306 banned such pictures on the walls of churches. Some religious teachers, including the church historian Eusebius (died circa 340), a younger contemporary of the said Synod, **called icons direct imports from pagan customs**, with which Christians have no business to be involved.”⁴²

Now that we have this information, it would be useful to reexamine briefly the claim of sacred tradition regarding the icon not created by human hands which, allegedly, Christ Himself made and sent to the ailing King Abgar V of Edessa. Sacred tradition claims that Christ made this icon and kissed it just before His death and resurrection, that is, at the very time described by all the four evangelists. Of course, as explained earlier, none of the apostles anywhere in the New Testament ever mentioned this event. Moreover, its narrative is quite improbable – for the reason that the first Church, precisely what Orthodox author Sergei Bulgakov wrote earlier, completely opposed any kind of visual art or statue that should be venerated or kissed (which were typical acts of polytheistic idolatrous cults). How could it be possible to imagine that the Lord Jesus Christ, the eternal Son of the Father, eternal God, who was devoted to His Holy Father’s will during his earthly ministry, could do such a thing as to create an icon and thus propagate and encourage the spread of idolatrous pagan rituals “clothed” in the robes of Christianity? And, in general, does any historical evidence prove that during the time of Christ there existed a Christian kingdom of Edessa, headed by the God-fearing King Abgar V? Let us read what church history says about this subject.

⁴⁰ Compare the historical facts with the previously mentioned claim by Mijac that “the (Orthodox) Church teaches that iconography existed from the very beginning of Christianity.”

⁴¹ The icons of the Virgin Mary and little Jesus in her hands were discussed earlier in the chapter “Blessed Mary or the Queen of Heaven” as a phenomenon which occurred only in the early fourth century under the influence of the cult of the Mother Goddess (Ishtar-Astarte) and her divine child, both taken from pagan cults.

⁴² Popovic, *General Church History*, Vol.1, 423. Author’s emphasis.

The traditional story of the first Christian emperor Abgar and his alleged correspondence with Jesus Christ comes from the “Ecclesiastical History” by the famous historian of the early Church, Bishop Eusebius of Caesarea, who lived in the fourth century A.D. However, although the church historian may have believed that some of the legends that he heard were accurate, and that it was true that at the time of Jesus Christ existed an empire headed by the first Christian ruler in the history of the world (and that he, most likely motivated by his pagan habits, sent an artist to paint Christ’s image), the historical facts speak otherwise.

Although it is true that Edessa (which was the capital of the small independent Osroene empire, and was located near the upper stream of the Euphrates River) really was the first Christian kingdom, it had not yet been established in the first half of the first century A.D. (i.e., during the earthly life of the Lord Jesus Christ).

Edessa was founded only in the second half of the second century. In fact, coins have been discovered with the image of the first Christian emperor, Abgar VIII, which is still kept in the British Museum, and they date from the period between 180-192 A.D. The emblem on these coins contains the symbol of the cross, that is, a character that could never have been used as a Christian symbol before the Lord's crucifixion (though, in fact, it was not the case even a century and a half after the event). However, since the time of the Lord Christ, the Edessan empire was ruled, presumably, by a man named Abgar (which is obviously the name given to the whole dynasty, akin to Herod mentioned in the New Testament, such as Herod the Great, then Antipas and Agrippa).

Later in history, it became very easy to create the legend of his conversion. Thus, the time when Edessa became the first Christian empire was moved about 150 years back in time (and declaring Abgar VIII to have lived not at the end of the second century, but instead at the beginning of the first!).

In spite of this historical manipulation of Edessa, the Bible itself testifies that in the first century A.D. no earthly rulers believed in the Lordship of Jesus Christ nor were saved by His atoning sacrifice. Inspired by the Spirit of the all-knowing God, the apostle Paul wrote:

*“However, we speak wisdom among those who are mature, yet not the wisdom of this age, nor of the rulers of this age, who are coming to nothing. But we speak the wisdom of God in a mystery, the hidden wisdom which God ordained before the ages **for our glory, which none of the rulers of this age knew**; for had they known, they would not have crucified the Lord of glory.”*⁴³

There was a glut of inventing legends in the period after the death of the apostles, and especially since the time of Constantine and later, especially as witnessed by examples from “Church History” as Eusebius Popovic had mentioned in earlier chapters. After all, the inconsistency in the alleged instances in which Orthodox tradition claims veracity and demands us to believe that “the image of Jesus (God forbid!) transformed at that very

⁴³ 1 Corinthians 2:6-8. Author’s emphasis.

moment” is just as illogical as alleging that He had an imaginary body. The praxis of the New Testament have no possible connection with the “Lord’s ministry” of sending an icon “not made by human hands” to heal a person.

Specifically, the New Testament states that Jesus could heal the sick from a distance not with miraculous icons, but by His mighty Word. An example is found in Luke 7:1-10, where among other things we read of the healing of the centurion’s servant:

*“Then Jesus went with them. And when He was already not far from the house, the centurion sent friends to Him, saying to Him, ‘Lord, do not trouble Yourself, for I am not worthy that You should enter under my roof. Therefore I did not even think myself worthy to come to You. **But say the word, and my servant will be healed**’... When Jesus heard these things, He marveled at him, and turned around and said to the crowd that followed Him, ‘I say to you, I have not found such great faith, not even in Israel!’ And those who were sent, returning to the house, **found the servant well who had been sick.**”*

After all, as I just pointed out, sacred tradition regarding the correspondence between Abgar and the Lord Jesus Christ, who allegedly sends the King an icon to heal him (because Jesus was unable to personally travel to Edessa) comes from one of the great religious authorities in the fourth century, who strongly opposes the creation of icons and considers them to be pagan customs. Therefore, if Eusebius, Bishop of Caesarea, really believed this tradition to be accurate, that the Lord Jesus was indeed the first icon artist, then he ran into the problem of brushing aside the views of the majority of church leaders who strongly opposed the introduction of iconography and icon veneration in the practice of Christ’s Church.⁴⁴

Conclusion

After all of this knowledge provided by early church history, we are left to conclude that the sources of sacred tradition provide unreliable and inaccurate information about the origin of the first icons. One example is that Eusebius Popovic, the respected Orthodox historian, in his *General Church History* makes no mention whatsoever. He does not recognize icons of Christ not made by human hands, nor icons painted by Luke the Evangelist, simply because they would contradict the clear historical evidence of the attitude of the first century church toward icons. The early church sided with iconoclasm.

As we witnessed from earlier studies of sacred tradition (in chapters on Christmas, Easter, etc.), the sources on which the Orthodox based their beliefs contain a lot of “stories” and legends introduced into the church centuries after the actual events occurred. It is quite obvious that the stories of King Abgar, Veronica and the iconographer Luke were invented by proponents of icons centuries later in order to justify their historical existence, even though in reality they have no historical evidence to support their claims.

⁴⁴ Historical data about the emperor Abgar and the Christian Empire of Edessa are taken from John Foster, *Church History 1*, (Baptist Theological School – ETO: Novi Sad, Carinthia 24) 82-3 and Eusebius Popovic, *General Church History*, Vol.1, 652-653.

We examined in a brief, yet detailed enough, manner to understand the Orthodox doctrine of icons. Through following their argument, we demonstrated that icons have no foundation whatsoever in the revelation given by God that we know as Holy Scripture. Therefore, it follows that today's Protestant-Evangelical, not Orthodox, Christians are correct in their claim to adhere to the early Christian apostolic teachings and religious practices that marked the dawn of a new era and the emergence of the New Testament Church.

The next chapter will detail the origin and organization of Orthodox monasticism, as well as the way of monastic life. Once again, we will demonstrate that the view of traditional Eastern Orthodoxy does not conform to God's will as He established the New Testament Church founded upon Christ's teaching and the apostles' preaching.