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In Living *Color*

Images of Christ and the Means of Grace



Reformed Fellowship, Inc.  
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*To all pilgrims  
who have not seen Christ  
in this age, yet love him,  
believe in him, and rejoice  
with inexpressible joy,  
waiting for their faith to be  
turned to sight in the  
age to come.*

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# Foreword

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IN POST-MODERN, twenty-first-century Western society, biblically sanctioned and carefully crafted confessional statements of the Reformed faith are either blatantly challenged or simply discarded as irrelevant for the church. *In Living Color* effectively addresses one doctrine that increasingly is being discarded—the scriptural and confessional rejection of man-made images of Christ.

In these pages, Danny Hyde argues with great clarity against all images of Jesus as man-made media. He shows that all such images are abominated in Scripture and roundly rejected by the Reformed confessional heritage without exception. Hyde goes on to argue, however, that God does provide us with His “media”—the preaching of His Word and the administration of His sacraments.

I hope that you, like me, will realize as you finish reading this book how poor man’s media are and how rich God’s media are! I am grateful for Rev. Hyde’s bold and unequivocal stand on this subject. I also believe that this book has far-reaching implications for all of worship. What the Christian church needs

today is not more man-made innovations but God's anointed ministers who preach the Word and administer the sacraments with the Spirit's unction. Also needed are God-fearing parishioners who are satisfied with the media of God's provision and, with it, thrive spiritually in worshiping God.

We would do well to heed the wise, pastoral counsel of the images of Christ that *In Living Color* provides. We must be convicted of the sin of allowing the present-day philosophy of our time to please people as much as possible and to become our philosophy of ministry. A true philosophy of ministry is that we aim to please God as much as possible by worshiping Him in a Christ-centered way in accord with His Word.

Above all, may God grant us grace to "look upon Him in the Word and sacraments" with ever greater awe and pleasure, so that we might be changed from glory to glory (2 Cor. 3:18).

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# Acknowledgements

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EVERYTIME I set out to put my thoughts onto pages I am reminded of the generosity and encouragement of the council of pastors, elders, and deacons at the Oceanside United Reformed Church, who allow me “diligently to teach and faithfully to defend” in my public preaching and writing the doctrines of the Reformed confessions in fulfillment of my vows in the Form of Subscription. I wish to thank Henry Gysen, George Knevelbaard, and all the members of the Reformed Fellowship board for their continued kindness in publishing what I write. An entire world of people like me who did not grow up in a Reformed church is out there, and your efforts to provide solid, accessible material introducing them to aspects of our precious Reformed Faith is commended. My heartfelt gratitude also goes out to Jeff Steenholdt and Mindy Wheeler for their painstaking work in designing and typesetting this book. As always, I thank my wife, Karajeane, and my sons, Cyprian and Caiden, who are ever so willing to show me the grace and forgiveness of Jesus, not merely in words, but “in living color.”

# Introduction

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**G**OD AND JESUS—at least their names—have been no strangers to the silver screen. Billed as “the greatest event in motion picture history,” Cecil B. DeMille’s 1956 Oscar-winning movie, *The Ten Commandments*, portrayed the story of God’s acts in redeeming Israel through Moses (Charlton Heston) from the clutches of Egypt and the Pharaoh (Yul Brynner). This movie included God, albeit conservatively imaged as an iridescent flame in the midst of the burning bush. Hollywood’s account of Jesus’ life hit the big screen almost a decade later in the Oscar-nominated *The Greatest Story Ever Told* (1965) with Max Von Sydow playing Jesus of Nazareth.

With these acclaimed films, it was only a matter of time until American evangelical Christians and Hollywood would unite, becoming strange bedfellows indeed. What Hollywood produced as dramatized art in the mid-twentieth century in the two aforementioned movies has now turned into a means of evangelism in the twenty-first century. With the release of *The Passion of the Christ* in 2004, Hollywood took notice that it could make money—a lot of money, in fact—while evangelicals could

make a lot of converts. With the release of *Evan Almighty* in 2007, the modern-day retelling of Noah and the Flood, with Oscar winner Morgan Freeman as God and Golden Globe-winning comedic actor, Steve Carrell as “Noah,” modern evangelicalism and Hollywood have come full circle in their partnership. Evangelism by means of entertainment has reached the big time.

That the visual media of television and movies are forms of entertainment has been forcefully argued by no less an authority than New York University communications theorist Neil Postman, who said, “Entertainment is the supra-ideology of all discourse on television. No matter what is depicted or from what point of view, the overarching presumption is that it is there for our amusement and pleasure.”<sup>1</sup> The medium of television, and movies, is inevitably entertainment, no matter the intention. This is even true of “religious” television. Postman chronicles that “televangelism” is not outside the influence of the media, but is drastically affected by it.<sup>2</sup> This is why he insightfully concludes, “I believe I am not mistaken in saying that Christianity is a demanding and serious religion. When it is delivered as easy and amusing, *it is another religion altogether*” (emphasis added).<sup>3</sup>

These recent movies and the evangelistic fervor they have created among American evangelical Christians present an excellent opportunity to evaluate the legitimacy of portraying God and Jesus Christ through the medium of visible pictures

and movies, whether as a means of artistic expression, education, entertainment, or ultimately, evangelism.<sup>4</sup> This growing legitimization of using film as an evangelistic tool creates another opportunity for Reformed Christians in the twenty-first century to *re-evaluate* their historic aversion to portraying any of the three persons of the holy Trinity—Father, Son, and Holy Spirit—especially the incarnate Son, Jesus Christ, in pictures, paintings, stained glass windows, and now movies. I say *re-evaluate their historic aversion to portraying any of the three persons of the holy Trinity* because our forefathers understood the second commandment, “Thou shalt not make unto thee any graven image” (Ex. 20:4; KJV), to forbid images of Jesus Christ. As we will see in this book, they expressed this understanding in the catechisms and confessions they wrote and that the Reformed churches officially adopted as the faith of their churches.

### ***The Struggle of Being in the World but Not of the World***

For many Reformed Christians today, this principle of having no images leads to an intense struggle with how the principle is put into practice, especially since our culture today is so image-saturated. Recently, the group TV-Free America compiled statistics showing that 99% of American households have a television, that the average American household has 2.24 televisions, and that 66% of American households have three or

more televisions. The result of this is that the television is turned on for an average of six hours and forty-seven minutes a day in American homes.

The struggle for the Reformed Christian comes from the desire to follow Jesus' words, when he said that we were to be in the world as its salt and light (Matt. 5:13–16), but also his words about not being of the world (John 17:6, 11, 13, 16). As salt, we are the preservative of this world, as God withholds his judgment for the sake of saving people out of the world, “from every tribe and language and people and nation” (Rev. 7:9). As light, we are to be a beacon, leading people to the truth in the midst of darkness. How do we do this with our lives and lips? Should we or should we not rely on the world's methods of advertising and entertainment that surround us as a means of getting the Word of God into the homes of lost sinners? We need to be rigorous, then, in our thinking about the theological principle of having no images, the culture around us, and the nexus between the two.

An illustration of this struggle between this Reformed principle of forbidding pictures of Christ and its application in practice was the 2004 movie, *The Passion of the Christ*. Reformed pastors across the land can testify of the intense questions parishioners asked about whether or not we as Reformed believers were allowed to see this movie or not. In my parish, even with a strong sense that we are living as pilgrims in this life, awaiting the “better country” (Heb. 11:16),

my parishioners desired to involve their faith in the public sphere since this movie was so visible to the culture and it seemed to be just the opportunity to communicate Christ.

In many Reformed churches across the United States, like my own, the precious heritage of the Reformed church has opened the eyes of many from the man-centered theologies and churches marking the landscape and has brought them to place the glory of God first in their thinking about his amazing grace. Many of these ex-evangelical Christians who had become Reformed in their theology and life saw *The Passion of the Christ* as an opportunity to keep up their commitment to witnessing and evangelism with their neighbors. After all, this would also be an opportunity to show our evangelical brothers and sisters that we do care about evangelism, despite being known as “the frozen chosen.” As Reformed Christians, we do believe in the church’s mandate to fulfill the Great Commission (Matt. 28:18–20) by preaching the gospel “promiscuously and without distinction” (Canons of Dort, II.5) and we have a desire to make Christ known far and wide.<sup>6</sup> We pray earnestly and daily that God will use the gospel to turn many to saving faith in Jesus. The question for the Christian whose beliefs and life are reformed according to the Word of God, though, is not *whether* to bear witness to our unsaved neighbors and support the work of evangelism, but *how* we do this.

*The Passion of the Christ* generated an enormous amount of interest and emotion in both the church and the world.

As those who believe in the sovereignty of God, confessing our faith week by week publicly that we believe in “God the Father almighty, Maker of heaven and earth” in the Apostles’ Creed, we do not deny that God is able to use this movie or any other means to some good end. For us, however, that is not the point. Just because God *can* do something does not mean he *will*.

In other words, the question is not what God may or may not do in any given situation, but how he has promised to work.

This question he answers in his revealed Word. Here we follow Deuteronomy 29:29, which distinguishes between the things revealed in God’s Word and the things hidden from us:

“The secret things belong to the Lord our God, but the things that are revealed belong to us and to our children forever, that we may do all the words of this law.” This verse applies to the question at hand in the following way. God may use a movie about Jesus to convert the lost; after all, he is God. This is hidden from us, though. We simply do not know if he will use a movie or not. What we need to do is think about and speak of God in the way he wants us to, taking his revealed Word seriously and seeking to apply it to our time and place in history. In a word, we must attempt to be a people who are faithful to the Scriptures since they are God’s revealed will to us.<sup>7</sup>

In the context of *The Passion of the Christ* and its promotion as “perhaps the best outreach opportunity in 2000 years,”

I counseled my congregation to ask the question, what has God revealed to us in Scripture about the way we are to do the work

of evangelism?<sup>8</sup> My counsel was not intended to dampen my parishioners' evangelistic zeal, but to redirect that zeal by explaining why the historic, confessionally Reformed position forbids making or using any images of any of the three persons of the glorious triune God—including the incarnate Son, Jesus Christ—and to focus our evangelistic zeal towards living holy lives before the world, being prepared to give an answer to those who may ask us about our hope (1 Pet. 3:15), to pray for the lost, and to invite them to hear the preached Word of the gospel.

### ***A Struggle that No Longer Exists?***

According to some, though, this struggle between principle and practice, reformation and relevance, no longer exists, or at least that it should not exist in the mind of the Reformed Christian. One example was a recent article on the *Christianity Today* website, in which G. Jeffrey MacDonald wrote an article entitled, “Reformed Protestants No Longer See Images as Idolatrous.”<sup>9</sup> In it, he said, “Reformed Protestants no longer see images as idolatrous... a longstanding hallmark of Reformed tradition is disappearing.” This was not really surprising, given the sad state of Christianity in the United States in our day.

What was surprising, though, was the effort MacDonald took in attempting to demonstrate his thesis of a “new Reformation”

occurring among churches with Reformed roots and his tacit assumption that if the churches he cited as evidence thought images were permitted, then we can assume all “Reformed” churches agreed. While realizing that the evidence Mr. MacDonald adduced and the conclusions of his findings are fairly well entrenched across the landscape of American Protestantism, there is another point of view. It is not quite a lone “voice in the wilderness,” but at least it is a voice from “the other side of the tracks.” It is a voice that needs to be heard to continue the conversation. This voice is the historic Reformed position on the second commandment, which this book will seek to exposit and apply.

### ***The Meaning of “Reformed”***

Of course all that I am saying implies that there is a difference in being an evangelical Christian, at least in its American connotation, and a *Reformed* Christian. In order to explain this more fully we will think about the meaning of that word “Reformed” here. To do this, we will continue to use G. Jeffrey MacDonald’s article as the background of our considerations, since he gives expression to commonly held beliefs about the meaning of the word Reformed. In his article, MacDonald’s argument exhibits several fundamental flaws, which evidence a certain predisposition to his thesis that “Reformed” churches are no longer against images of Christ in the various forms

of art—paintings, icons, statues, windows, and movies.

First, the article does not demonstrate a working knowledge of what the title “Reformed” actually stood for in the sixteenth century or what it continues to stand for by those who self-consciously define themselves by it. The reader gets the impression that the only significance in being Reformed in a historical sense is that the sixteenth-century Reformers could not stand good works of art! MacDonald’s article leads one to think that Reformed Christians rallied around the banner, “Down with Michelangelo! Down with Rembrandt!” Furthermore, one is left thinking that being a Reformed Christian today means belonging to a generic mass of evangelical churches, except for having remote roots in at least a branch of the Reformed tradition.

To be “Reformed” means so much more than simply being tied to some obsolete tradition. No mention was made in MacDonald’s article that to be a part of a Reformed church means to be reformed according to Scripture. The Protestant reformers confessed the great doctrine of Scripture alone (*sola Scriptura*), which is the sufficient source for Christian belief, life, and worship. Because of this emphasis on getting back to the source of divine truth in the Scriptures, the Reformers proclaimed passionately that sinners are justified before the judicial bar of an almighty and holy God by faith alone (*sola fide*) in Christ alone (*solus Christus*). These twin truths of Scripture and faith, *sola Scriptura* and *sola fide*, were codified in the Reformation catechisms and confessions such as the Three

Forms of Unity—the Belgic Confession (1561), Heidelberg Catechism (1563), and Canons of Dort (1618–19)—and the Westminster Standards—the Westminster Confession of Faith and Larger and Shorter Catechisms (1647).

This is so important for our day, in which we are seeing many come to the Reformation faith, life, and worship from the mass of evangelical churches dotting our land. We certainly rejoice in this, but must also be aware that for many of these zealous Calvinists, to be Reformed means that they have come to learn about the so-called “five points of Calvinism,” or, as it is better described, “the doctrines of grace.” Many think that *this* is Reformed theology.

To have a “Reformed theology” means so much more than believing in the acronym TULIP. To be Reformed means to be confessional. This means that we confess the Bible as the Word of God alone and as it is summarized faithfully for us in the ancient Christian creeds of the church and in the Reformation catechisms and confessions mentioned above. These documents define for Reformed churches who they are and why they are who they are.

A cursory glance at the Belgic Confession of Faith, published in 1561, for example, reveals that to be Reformed is not only to believe in the sovereignty of God in salvation, but also the following:

- That God exists and reveals himself through creation generally, and Scripture especially (arts. 1–2);

- That the sixty-six books of the Old and New Testaments alone are the Word of God (arts. 3–7);
- That God is a triune God as the ancient churches and creeds declare (arts. 8–11);
- That God made all things out of nothing (art. 12);
- That the God who made everything also cares for everything (art. 13);
- That humanity has been plunged into hopelessness by Adam's sin (arts. 14–15);
- That God's grace alone provides the remedy in Jesus Christ (arts. 16–17);
- That Jesus Christ is one person in whom are united two distinct natures, a divine nature and a human nature as the ancient Definition of Chalcedon teaches (arts. 18–19);
- That by faith alone in Christ alone we are justified our sins are forgiven and Christ's righteousness is imputed to us (arts. 20–23);
- That we are sanctified by the power of the Holy Spirit (art. 24);

- That having been brought into union with Christ through faith alone we are brought into union with Christ's church as its members (arts. 27–28);
- That there are true churches and false churches, and that true churches have three “marks”: the pure preaching of the gospel, the pure administration of the sacraments, and the exercise of church discipline (art. 29);
- That this church is ruled according to a presbyterian form of church government where all ministers are equal and where congregations have a role to play in the calling of church officers (arts. 30–31);
- That worship is to be enjoyed and performed according to the “regulative principle of worship” (art. 32);
- That baptism and the Lord's Supper are means of grace (art. 33);
- That the children of believers are members of the covenant and therefore are to be baptized (art. 34);
- That there is a “real presence” of Christ in the Lord's Supper (art. 35);
- That Jesus Christ has already begun to reign and that he shall come again once, at the end of the ages, to judge the living and the dead (art. 37).<sup>10</sup>

These very confessions that define our theology, life, and worship include the prohibition against images of God and of Jesus Christ, as we shall see in the next chapter.

The second flaw of MacDonald's article under question is the problem of selective evidence. Mentioned among "Reformed" institutions and denominations are Andover Newton Theological School, whose faculty is made up of ministers/elders in the United Church of Christ, Disciples of Christ, American Baptist, United Methodist, and Presbyterian Church (U.S.A.). He also provides quotations from a minister at "Warehouse 242," which is affiliated with the Evangelical Presbyterian Church, a minister at "Hope Church," which is a joint effort of both the United Church of Christ and the Disciples of Christ, and a professor at Calvin College, which is the college of the Christian Reformed Church, which was recently excluded from the North American Presbyterian and Reformed Council (NAPARC) in 2002.<sup>11</sup> Add to this the unsubstantiated claim that "Reformed" missionaries are no longer relying on Bibles, but on the "Jesus Film" to do their work.

To be charitable, I will include all the institutions/denominations just mentioned under the "Reformed" umbrella. In doing so, it is no stretch to say that these are on the left of the theological spectrum. The selectivity of evidence is shown in the fact that no quotations or citations were given from ministers/professors from any of the North American Presbyterian and Reformed Council (NAPARC) churches on

our continent. Surely it is not too hard to find someone from the Presbyterian Church in America, Heritage Reformed Churches, Associate Reformed Presbyterian Church, Reformed Presbyterian Church in North America, Free Reformed Churches, or United Reformed Churches in North America, to name a few. The question of whether “Reformed” Protestants no longer see images as idolatrous remains to be answered by MacDonald’s essay.

Add to this the fact that Mr. Macdonald’s thesis is propped up with the emotionally repulsive story of Calvinists running through towns like madmen, destroying beautiful art. This may have been true in some instances, such as in the Netherlands in the 1560’s when religious and political zeal united against the tyranny of Phillip II of Spain, yet one need only read the most recent research on the history of the Netherlands in the 1550s–60s to understand the context in which this was done, as well as the fact that many of the Reformed preachers were against this wave of iconoclasm.<sup>12</sup> MacDonald also uses the imagery of “whitewashing” churches, which comes from the history of the Reformed churches in Zürich under the leadership of Ulrich Zwingli. What he does not mentioned was the fact that images (idols, and not simply artistic Christian expression) were removed decently and in an orderly way by order of the city council in June 1524. He also does not mention the fact that St. Pierre’s Cathedral in Geneva, where John Calvin preached, had a cross atop its spire that was not

over-zealously removed. When it was struck by lightning and it caught on fire, it was not replaced.<sup>13</sup>

When Mr. MacDonald says that the Reformed tradition “has for centuries regarded pictures with great suspicion,” it depends on what kind of pictures he is speaking about; if those of Christ and/or the Father and Spirit, then absolutely, yes. This is not to equate religious images of the holy Trinity with art, though. This is incorrect. It is not art that the Reformers responded to, but to the false religion fostered by stained glass windows, statues, and crucifixes. In Reformed terminology an “image” refers to any representation of any of the persons of the Holy Trinity (Westminster Larger Catechism, Q&A 109; Heidelberg Catechism, Q&A 96–98), not to artistic expression of God’s creation.

### ***Conclusion: The Purpose of this Book***

Contrary to MacDonald’s article, then, not all Reformed Protestants agree that Christians have the freedom to use images of Jesus Christ, nor do they agree with his overstatement that this point of view is disappearing. After all, we are not simply voicing crass iconoclasm or outmoded tradition, but we are expressing a position firmly rooted in biblical exegesis, the Protestant confessions, and church history.

The simple purpose of the book you hold in your hands, then, is to give a pastoral explanation from Scripture and our

confessions for the classic Reformed prohibition of images of God and Jesus Christ from Scripture and our confessions. We will do this by looking at man's desire for the visual in his relationship with God, but then we will show how God rejects man's efforts to image him. Instead of images, God has given the new covenant church the Word and sacraments as manifestations of his presence among us until Christ comes again, visibly and corporeally—in living color.