

Are images of Jesus violations of the “no idols” commandment?

In Exodus 20:4 it does indeed say that we are not to make any carved or graven images depicting anything in all of creation. However, we have to be careful, especially when dealing with Old Testament law, to ensure that we don't just automatically jump to conclusions and take anything out of context. It is important to look at this particular commandment in its entirety, which includes verse 5. When we look at verse 5 we get a little bit deeper explanation of the purpose for verse 4. Verse 5 says, “You shall not bow down to them or serve them, for I the LORD your God am a jealous God....” When we take in conjunction with verse 4 we get a better understand of what the commandment really is. We are not to create carved images or likeness of anything in creation for the purpose of worshipping those items. They are not to be set up as gods. If we just stopped at verse 4 then we could argue that any type of woodcarving is sinful because when we carve things out of wood or stone we generally shape something from creation. So it is very important that we look at verse 5 as well. So how do we apply this to Jesus? Jesus is, as a member of the trinity, indeed God. However it would seem that the issue would be if we made carved images or painted pictures of Jesus for the purpose of worshipping them. Jesus is not in that painting nor is He in the wooden image. These are items to remind us of Him but they are not to be worshipped. There isn't anything inherently wrong with having pictures of Jesus or a cross with you. However, there is an issue if these things are worshipped or given greater worth than they really have. A good example would be the Ark of Covenant. This was a representation of God's presence with the Israelites, but it was not actually God. The same is true for these pictures of Jesus or carvings of Jesus. They are representations of Him but they are not actually Jesus. We break this commandment when we begin to worship these items more than we worship the one whom they represent.