

“Icons!”

Genesis 1.26-27; Deuteronomy 4.15-18; Luke 20.22-25; Colossians 1.15

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Welcome to the Greek island of Santorini! One of the most beautiful islands in the world, partially a result of one of the largest volcanic eruptions in recorded history. What you’re looking at here is basically the *inside* of a volcano, now wide open to the Aegean Sea. The island’s capital city, Fira, is nestled on the cliff top, 1300 feet above sea level. From this side of the island, you can ascend to Fira from the port by riding a donkey up that jagged footpath, by walking up that same footpath, or by riding a cable car. My three older sons can tell you which way they would *not* recommend!

There are two large churches in the city of Fira: the Catholic Cathedral, dedicated to St. John the Baptist, in what is called the “Catholic quarter” of the city; and the Orthodox Metropolitan Cathedral. This massive, white-faced edifice is the most prominent landmark of Santorini, visible from ship from miles away. It is a Greek Orthodox cathedral, serving the Greek Orthodox population of the city, which is by far the majority. The Catholics hold a distant second. Protestants are practically nonexistent.

We were not able to step too far into the Orthodox cathedral. We were not dressed appropriately. The lighting was dim; there was a man sitting cross-legged on the stone floor, praying; it was clear that this was a house of worship, not a destination for tourists. We caught a glimpse of some of the magnificent art and architecture – like the icons in front of the praying man, or the massive chandelier overhead, framed on all sides by more art ... and above it all, a massive icon of Christ.

Welcome, now, to the Greek island of Mykanos, about 70 miles north of Santorini. When you disembark at the main port, one of the first structures you pass is this little building, a church. This is what it looks like on the inside: no pews, no place to sit other than a small bench along the side, an elaborate stand with a bunch of candles, a little doorway in the far wall that leads to a little alcove that only a priest can enter, and a series of icons around the wall, some large and some small. To the left of the door you can see the Madonna and child (Mary and baby Jesus); to the right you can see Jesus, holding the Word of God with one hand and blessing us with the other. There is no “welcome” sign; there is nobody on duty; there are no flyers for new visitors. Maybe Jesus is “welcome” enough.

We enjoyed a bike tour of part of the island. One of our stops was this little structure, another small Greek Orthodox church. Our guide explained that there are about 700 or 800 little churches like this spread around the island, which has a population of only about 10,000 people. That means that, on

average, there's a church for about every 12 to 14 people. These are *not* megachurches! Each family typically has their own little church – I've been tempted to call them "shrines" – and each family takes care of their own, making sure – among other things – that the candles are lit every morning. There are priests that travel around from church to church, whenever there's a baptism or a wedding or a funeral.

The church had icons, of course. Here's our guide, talking to us about the icons. There were quite a number of them – more icons than the number of people who can fit in the church all at once.

I found myself thinking, "This is a whole different world." It is so *completely different* than anything you or I are used to. It feels like an entirely different *religion*. But it's not. These people worship Jesus Christ – same as we do. It's just ... they worship very *differently* than we do.

There's a whole history here; how the Roman church developed differently from the Greek church; tensions developing over time between the Western church and the Eastern church, culminating in the great schism of 1054, when the Roman Catholic Church and the Eastern Orthodox Church officially parted ways. Then there was the Protestant Reformation in the 16th century, which ultimately led to the formation of *thousands* of different Protestant denominations. Historically we are closer to the Roman Catholic Church than we are to the Eastern Orthodox Church, of which the Greek Orthodox Church is a part – but it's all part of one big family tree. These Greek Orthodox Christians are our distant cousins.

There are lots of differences – but the biggest may be these icons. From the early centuries of the church, Christians in places like Greece and Turkey tended to favor this form of devotional art – typically, portrait-like paintings or frescoes. If you're looking for Christian statues, go to Italy; if you're looking for Christian icons, go to Greece or Turkey. The most prevalent icons feature Jesus, Mary, various saints, or angels, and the way the images *look* has changed remarkably little over nearly 20 centuries of Christian history. Icon artists have taken great care to preserve both content and style; the job of the artist was to copy previous generations of art as closely as possible. Innovation has been generally frowned upon, and sometimes considered heretical. "Creativity" is not valued in this tradition!

The word "icon" comes from the Greek word *eikon*, which simply means "image." The word appears numerous times in the New Testament, and in the Greek translation of the Old Testament. The first instance is in Genesis, when God creates humankind "in his image; in the image of God he created them" (Genesis 1.26-27). Literally, that's an *icon*: God created humankind "in his *eikon*." Jesus uses the word when he asks whose *image* appears on a Roman coin (cf. Luke 20.22-25); literally, that's an *icon*. The head of Abraham Lincoln that appears on every penny is a kind of icon – except it has no devotional significance. Paul refers to Jesus as "the image of the invisible God" (1 Corinthians 1.15); literally, "the *eikon* of the invisible God." Jesus is an *icon* of God, an image, a visible expression of divinity. And so on. I've given you a small sampling; the word appears a couple dozen more times throughout the Bible.

But then, there's the commandment telling us not to make idols. The Second Commandment says, "You shall not make for yourself an idol, whether in the form of anything that is in heaven above, or that is on the earth beneath, or that is in the water under the earth." (Exodus 20.4; Deuteronomy 5.8) Is an *icon* an *idol*? What's the difference? In Deuteronomy 4, we read this: "take care and watch yourselves closely, so that you do not act corruptly by making an *idol* for yourselves, in the form of any

figure.” (Deuteronomy 4.16) There’s a curious difference in wording here: in the Greek translation of the Ten Commandments (in Exodus 20 and Deuteronomy 5), what is forbidden is an *eidol* – an “idol” – whereas in Deuteronomy 4, what is forbidden is an *eikon* – an “icon.” I find it interesting that the wording is not consistent. If you read Greek, it sounds like both *idols* and *icons* are forbidden. But icon-defenders point out that God himself directed the Israelites to build images of cherubim to put on the lid of the Ark of the Covenant, and that God himself directed Moses to make an image of a bronze snake and put it up on a pole. Clearly, not *all* images are bad. But where’s the line? When is an image or an icon okay, and when is it not? At what point does something cross the line from being a legitimate expression of Christian piety and devotion, and become idolatrous? Christians have hotly debated this through the centuries. There have been periods in Christian history when zealous reformers would violently rip down and destroy icons and other forms of Christian religious art. (We wouldn’t want people like that to get their hands on our stained glass windows!) One of the primary reasons why Protestant crosses typically do not depict Jesus but Catholic crosses do is because of the zeal of some of the early Protestant reformers, who believed that we should have no images of God or Jesus *at all*.

Yet for most of Christian history, people have been using images like this in their devotional life, to help them worship God. This particular image, the most common iconic image of Jesus, is called Christ Pantokrator, “Christ All-Powerful.” This image comes from a church in St. Petersburg, Russia, but it’s the same symbolism that we saw in all Orthodox churches we saw in Greece. The letters around Jesus’ head mean, “The One Who Is,” a reference to the beginning of the book of Revelation, where Jesus is called “the one who is and who was and who is to come.” (Revelation 1.8) What struck me most about the use of icons was how *personal* the prayers become. Our guide told us a story: There was one of these little Greek Orthodox churches somewhere. Money seemed to be disappearing out of the place where people would put their offerings. Someone decided they would try to catch the culprit. He entered the church, went into that little alcove where only the priest was supposed to go, and waited. Sometime later, a poor man came in, got down on his knees, and started praying to the Virgin Mary. “Blessed Virgin, Holy Mother of God,” he prayed, “you know that I am a poor man. My family is hungry and I cannot afford to feed them. In your mercy I ask you to forgive me as I take money from this coffer.” At this point the other man’s voice booms out from the alcove: “Aren’t you ashamed of yourself? Don’t you know that it is a sin to steal?” The poor man turns his attention to one of the other icons on the wall and says, “Saint John, could you stop interfering? I’m talking to Saint Mary right now.” The story is legendary, apocryphal, but I think there’s some truth here: *there’s something very personal about these prayers involving icons*. When these Christians pray, *they’re really talking to the one they’re praying to*. When they’re talking to Jesus, *they’re really talking to Jesus*. It feels like their prayer life is very rich. Is that because they have something to look at? When we pray, most of the time, we close our eyes, so we’re looking at the back of our eyelids! Is it easier to really pray to Jesus if you can see a holy *representation* of Jesus? Maybe so!

I bought myself an icon in Santorini. It’s a Christ Pantokrator, made of silver. Honestly, I’m not quite sure what I’m going to do with it. Is this a piece of art to be displayed? Is it something I want to keep private devotional use? Maybe I need to pray on that. Maybe I need to *talk to Jesus....*

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