

## WCF 22: OF LAWFUL OATHS AND VOWS

During the days of the 16<sup>th</sup> Century Reformation, the Protestant cause was divided into three camps. The first was the Lutherans, led originally by Martin Luther; the second may be known as the Reformed camp led by Zwingli and Calvin; while the third may be known as the Anabaptists. They are known as anabaptist because they denied the legitimacy of infant baptism, and so required converted who were baptised as infants to be re-baptised. But the Anabaptists were also known as ‘Radical Reformers’ because they felt that the Reformation achieved by the Lutherans and also the Reformed camp did not go far enough. Amongst some of the things that they felt the Reformers did not go far enough is to denounce the use of oaths and vows. They insisted based on passages such as Matthew 5:37 that it is the Lord’s teaching that it is sinful to make oaths and vows. The Reformers saw, however, that to take such a view would be to make Scripture contradict Scripture. They saw that the consistent view of Scripture is that while taking of oaths and vows lightly is to be condemned, oaths and vows might be legitimately used when the occasion calls for. This is the view propounded in our Confession. It is also the view of all major Reformed and Calvinistic Confessions, including, the Baptist Confession of Faith of 1689 (cf. *BCF* 23).

### On Lawful Oaths

*22.1 A lawful oath is part of religious worship,<sup>1</sup> wherein, upon just occasion, the person swearing solemnly calleth God to witness what he asserteth, or promiseth; and to judge him according to the truth or falsehood of what he sweareth.<sup>2</sup>*

<sup>1</sup>Deut 10:20; <sup>2</sup>Ex 20:7; Lev 19:12; 2 Cor 1:23; 2 Chr 6:22–23.

- An oath is an exercise in which a person calls upon God to witness the truth of what he is saying (assertory oath) or to witness a promise (promissory oath) he is making. The difference between an oath, and a mere a statement or simple promise is that it involves calling upon God to judge, or, in other words, punish the swearer if he were to fail to tell the truth or fail to keep his promise.
- The making of oaths is clearly legitimate in the Old Covenant since the Jews were taught to swear by God’s name: “Thou shalt fear the LORD thy God; him shalt thou serve, and to him shalt thou cleave, and swear by his name” (Deut 10:20). In fact, the 3<sup>rd</sup> commandment assumes the legitimacy of swearing by the name of God, but warns against false swearing (Ex 20:7, Lev 19:12).
- What about under the New Covenant? It is clearly still permissible and indeed, proper since the Apostle Paul frequently make use of oaths to affirm what he says: “Moreover I call God for a record upon my soul, that to spare you I came not as yet unto Corinth” (2 Cor 1:23; cf. Rom 9:1; Gal 1:10).
- Notice that our Confession defines oaths and vows as being legitimate parts of religious worship (here and *WCF* 21.5). The reason for this is found in the nature of oaths and vows—that they are to be made in the presence of the God and His people.

*22.2 The name of God only is that by which men ought to swear, and therein it is to be used with all holy fear and reverence:<sup>1</sup> therefore to swear vainly or rashly by that glorious and dreadful Name, or to swear at all by any other thing, is sinful, and to be abhorred.<sup>2</sup> Yet, as in matters of weight and moment, an oath is warranted by the Word of God, under the New Testament, as well as under the Old;<sup>3</sup> so a lawful oath being imposed by lawful authority, in such matters, ought to be taken.<sup>4</sup>*

<sup>1</sup>Dt 6:13; <sup>2</sup>Ex 20:7; Jer 5:7; Mt 5:34, 37; Jas 5:12; <sup>3</sup>Heb 6:16; 2 Cor 1:23; Isa 65:16; <sup>4</sup>1 Kgs 8:31; Neh 13:25; Ezra 10:5.

- Because God alone is able to see our hearts and has the power to execute judgement, and will always act justly, an oath in the name of God is an appeal to his omniscience, omnipotence and justice. Therefore an oath may be taken only in the name of God. To swear by any other thing is sinful—not only because it would be a violation of Deuteronomy 6:13, “Thou shalt ... swear by his name,” but because it would rob God of the honour due to Him and would involve a superstitious idolatry in which the thing sworn by is ascribed some power it does not have.
- Also, since God is transcendentally Holy and Sovereign, any oath in His name must be used with all holy fear and reverence and not vainly or rashly. Instead we must swear “in truth, in judgment, and in righteousness” (Jer 4:2).

- It was the Jew’s habit of swearing rashly and trivially that the Lord spoke against in Matthew 5:34-37, “Again, ye have heard that it hath been said by them of old time, Thou shalt not forswear thyself, but shalt perform unto the Lord thine oaths: But I say unto you, Swear not at all; neither by heaven; for it is God’s throne: Nor by the earth; for it is his footstool: neither by Jerusalem; for it is the city of the great King. Neither shalt thou swear by thy head, because thou canst not make one hair white or black. But let your communication be, Yea, yea; Nay, nay: for whatsoever is more than these cometh of evil.”

Someone may object that the Lord seems to be giving a blanket prohibition, but this cannot be the case, firstly because the Apostle Paul practised it without giving a hint that he thought it improper; and secondly notice that the Lord does not condemn swearing in the Lord’s name, but swearing by the furnishing of the temple. Perhaps the Jews had trivialised the making of an oath so much that they knew better than to swear in God’s name.

- Our Confession therefore advises that oaths should be taken only in “matters of weight and moment.” This would include testifying in a trial or making important declarations or even in swearing allegiance to a nation—which, of course, would be on condition that it does not compromise your faith and fidelity to the Lord. Moreover, our Confession advises that when the law requires an oath to be taken, the Christian who may do so with a clear conscience ought to oblige. This is for the maintenance of peace and order in the land: “An oath for confirmation is to them an end of all strife” (Heb 6:16).

*22.3 Whosoever taketh an oath, ought duly to consider the weightiness of so solemn an act, and therein to avouch nothing but what he is fully persuaded is the truth.<sup>1</sup> Neither may any man bind himself by oath to any thing but what is good and just, and what he believeth so to be, and what he is able and resolved to perform.<sup>2</sup> Yet it is a sin to refuse an oath touching any thing that is good and just, being imposed by lawful authority.<sup>3</sup>*

<sup>1</sup>Ex 20:7; Jer 4:2; <sup>2</sup>Gen 24:2-3, 5-6, 8-9; <sup>3</sup>Num 5:19, 21; Neh 5:12; Ex 22:7-11.

Some important conditions must be observed when making oaths:

- Firstly, if it is an oath to assert a truth (such as during a trial), we must be fully persuaded of the truth of the matter before making the oath. We may not for example swear that something is true for which we have no little or no knowledge or recollection. To do so would not only be to take God’s name in vain, but potentially to bear false witness.
- Secondly, if it involves a promise to do something, we must ensure:
  - (1) That we believe that what we are promising to do is just or fair, and good or righteous both from the perspective of the Law God and of a good conscience; and
  - (2) That we are able and have enough resolve to do what we promise to do.

If these two conditions are met, the Christian ought to oblige when required to take an oath by all lawful authority, both civil and ecclesiastical. On the other hand, if these two conditions are not met, we should refrain from taking the vow, or we would be binding ourselves sinfully.

*22.4 An oath is to be taken in the plain and common sense of the words, without equivocation or mental reservation.<sup>1</sup> It cannot oblige to sin; but in anything not sinful, being taken, it binds to performance, although to a man’s own hurt;<sup>2</sup> nor is it to be violated, although made to heretics or infidels.<sup>3</sup>*

<sup>1</sup>Jer 4:2; Ps 24:4; <sup>2</sup>1 Sam 25:22, 32-34; Ps 15:4; <sup>3</sup>Ezk 17:16, 18-19; Josh 9:18-19; 2 Sam 21:1.

1. How an oath should be taken?
  - a. It should be taken in the plain and common sense of the words.
  - b. It must not be made with equivocation or mental reservation. i.e., there must be “entire correspondence between the sentiments of the mind and the words of the oath, in their common obvious meaning, and as understood by those who administer it” (Shaw, 288). “To allow of mental reservation in swearing, as the Church of Rome in certain cases does, is to defeat the very end of an oath, to destroy all confidence among men, and to involve the swearer in the heinous sin of perjury” (Shaw, 288-9).
2. What are the limits of an oath?
  - a. It cannot oblige to sin.

- b. If it does not oblige to sin, then it binds the swearer to performance even it is to his own hurt: “He honoureth them that fear the LORD. He that sweareth to his own hurt, and changeth not” (Ps 15:4b).
3. What if the oath is made to infidels or heretics?

Contrary to Romish teaching, it is still to be kept. This is clearly taught in Scripture in the case of the oath that the Israelites made with the Gibeonites who tricked them into the oath (2 Sam 21:1; cf. Jos 9:1-15), and the case of the oath made by Zedekiah to the Nebuchadnezzar (Ezk 17:16-19).

## On Vows

22.5 *A vow is of the like nature with a promissory oath, and ought to be made with the like religious care, and to be performed with the like faithfulness.*<sup>1</sup>

<sup>1</sup>Isa 19:21; Eccl 5:4-6; Ps 61:8; 66:13-14.

22.6 *It is not to be made to any creature, but to God alone:<sup>1</sup> and that it may be accepted, it is to be made voluntarily, out of faith, and conscience of duty, in way of thankfulness for mercy received, or for the obtaining of what we want; whereby we more strictly bind ourselves to necessary duties, or to other things, so far and so long as they may fitly conduce thereunto.*<sup>2</sup>

<sup>1</sup>Ps 76:11; Jer 44:25-26; <sup>2</sup>Deut 23:21-23; Ps 50:14; Gen 28:20-22; 1 Sam 1:11; Ps 66:13-14; 132:2-5.

22.7 *No man may vow to do any thing forbidden in the Word of God, or what would hinder any duty therein commanded, or which is not in his own power, and for the performance whereof he hath no promise of ability from God.<sup>1</sup> In which respects, popish monastical vows of perpetual single life, professed poverty, and regular obedience, are so far from being degrees of higher perfection, that they are superstitious and sinful snares, in which no Christian may entangle himself.*<sup>2</sup>

<sup>1</sup>Acts 23:12, 14; Mk 6:26; Num 30:5, 8, 12-13; <sup>2</sup>Mt 19:11-12; 1 Cor 7:2, 9; Eph 4:28; 1 Pet 4:2; 1 Cor 7:23.

- *Definition:* A vow is like a promissory oath except that it is made to God rather than man. Unlike an oath in which God is called as a witness, in the vow, both God and men are called as witness, though the lack of human witness does not diminish the responsibility attached to the vow. It is to be made with the same kind of care: “When thou vowest a vow unto God, defer not to pay it; for he hath no pleasure in fools: pay that which thou hast vowed. Better is it that thou shouldest not vow, than that thou shouldest vow and not pay. Suffer not thy mouth to cause thy flesh to sin; neither say thou before the angel, that it was an error: wherefore should God be angry at thy voice, and destroy the work of thine hands?” (Ecc 5:4-6).
- *Purpose:* (a) To acknowledge “thankfulness for mercy received”; (b) “For the obtaining of what we want [i.e., lack].” It was for such a reason that Hannah vowed to the Lord: “O LORD of hosts, if thou wilt indeed look on the affliction of thine handmaid, and remember me, and not forget thine handmaid, but wilt give unto thine handmaid a man child, then I will give him unto the LORD all the days of his life, and there shall no razor come upon his head” (1 Sam 1:11).
- *Use:* To more strictly bind ourselves to necessary duties. This is a helpful aid which recognises us of the weakness of human flesh and of our forgetfulness. The difference between a vow and the law of God is that in the latter, God binds us by His authoritative command; in the former, we bind ourselves by our voluntary engagements. A vow carries secondary obligations, while the law carries primary obligations and must be given priority if the vow contradicts it. A vow is especially useful in cases where an obligation is morally indifferent or of a positive nature, e.g., in the church membership vow to “give to the Lord’s work as He shall prosper me.” A marriage vow is similarly of great use.
- *Condition for legality:* (a) “made voluntarily,” i.e., not compelled; (b) “out of faith”; (c) out of “conscience of duty.”
- *Restrictions:* (a) Must not be anything forbidden in the Word of God; (b) Must be something the person vowing has ability to fulfill; or (c) Something which God has promised ability to fulfill. As such monastic vows of celibacy (*contra* 1 Cor 7:2, 9), voluntary poverty (*contra* Eph 4:28) and regular obedience to the Pope (*contra* 1 Pet 4:2; 1 Cor 7:23) are not legitimate and are instead “superstitious and sinful snares, in which no Christian may entangle himself.”
- *Note:* An illegitimate vow is not binding. A person who had previously vow a vow that is contrary to the Word of God, or will cause him to sin against God (not just causing him to loose wealth or reputation—Ps 15:4), ought to repent and renounce his vow and consider it to be null and void. Herod, as such,

ought to have repented and renounced his vow rather than added to his sin by beheading John the Baptist for the sake of his vow (Mk 6:23, 26).

- *Summary:*

	<b>Content</b>	<b>Made to</b>	<b>Witness(es)</b>	<b>Restrictions</b>
<b>Oath</b>	Assertion	Men	God	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Persuaded of its truth.</li> </ul>
	Promise			<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• What is good and just;</li> <li>• What person making the vow believes to be good and just</li> <li>• What he is able and resolves to perform.</li> </ul>
<b>Vow</b>	Promise	God alone	God & optionally, Men	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• What is not forbidden in the Word of God;</li> <li>• What the person vowing has ability to fulfil;</li> <li>• What God has promised to give ability to fulfil.</li> </ul>

- *Additional note:* The preferred mode of taking an oath or vow is the lifting up of the hand. This is the usual mode mentioned in the Scripture: “And Abram said to the king of Sodom, I have lift up mine hand unto the LORD, the most high God, the possessor of heaven and earth” (Gen 14:22). “And the angel which I saw stand upon the sea and upon the earth lifted up his hand to heaven, And swore by him that liveth for ever and ever, who created heaven, and the things that therein are, and the earth, and the things that therein are, and the sea, and the things which are therein, that there should be time no longer” (Rev 10:5–6).