

## **CHAPTER 22**

### **OF LAWFUL OATHS AND VOWS**

#### **Oaths**

As opposed to vows, which are solemn promises to God, oaths are taken to prove the truthfulness of what someone is saying, whether or not it contains a promise. Although not frequent, the taking of both oaths and vows is an important part of life. It was also important in Bible times (cf. Matt 23:16-22). The Westminster Confession first discusses oaths; then it discusses vows.

#### ***Definition of oaths***

“1. A lawful oath is a part of religious worship, 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.”

Notice that these oaths involve the name of God, and thereby are acts of worship. They recognize him as able to judge the truthfulness of what is said, and to enforce it at the last day.

#### ***Form and occasion of oaths***

“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; 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. 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; so a lawful oath, being imposed by lawful authority, in such matters, ought to be taken.”

God has commanded that all such oaths be taken in his own name (Deut 6:13). Therefore, to swear by anything else or by anyone else is wrong, since God alone is in a position to judge our oath. Oaths are permitted in both the Old Testament and the New Testament (Heb 6:16; 2 Cor 1:23). But they are to be taken only in the most serious circumstances (cf. Jas 5:12). They should not be refused when required by the civil authority, as the Quakers and some other groups do (Ezra 10:5). This is especially the case when called upon to give testimony under oath (for example, Exod 22:7-11).

### ***Truthfulness of oaths***

“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. Neither may any man bind himself by oath to anything but what is good and just, and what he believeth so to be, and what he is able and resolved to perform.”

Of course, to lie, even without an oath, is a sin, included under the ninth commandment. But to lie under oath is a much graver one, since it specifically invokes the name of God. When under oath, we must tell the full truth. Likewise, binding oneself with an oath is much more significant than a simple statement, as the following sections explain.

The original form of the Confession contained an additional sentence: “Yet is it a sin to refuse an oath touching anything that is good and just, being imposed by lawful authority.” The American form of the Confession has left this sentence out, since some Christians, in good conscience, think it is a sin to take an oath (referencing such passages as Matt 5:34-36 and Jas 5:12), and such an oath cannot be compelled. In those cases, the words “promise” or “affirm” may be substituted.

### ***Content of oaths***

“4. An oath is to be taken in the plain and common sense of the words, without equivocation or mental reservation. It cannot oblige to sin; but in any thing not sinful, being taken, it binds to performance, although to a man’s own hurt; nor is it to be violated, although made to heretics or infidels.”

Oaths are to be spoken and understood in their plain meaning (Ps 24:4). We are to fulfill our promises made under oath, even if it means we must sacrifice to do it (Ps 15:4). And we should honor oaths made even to unbelievers (Josh 9:18-19; cf. 2 Sam 21:1). This last point is important, for the Roman Catholic Church believes that oaths made to heretics do not have to be kept; they convinced the secular ruler to break his oath to John Huss, and tried to do so again in the case of Martin Luther.

## **Vows**

As mentioned earlier, vows are a particular type of oath, in which God is called to witness to guarantee that a particular person will fulfill a promise he or she is making. The last three paragraphs of the chapter deal with vows.

### ***Definition of vows***

“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.”

We note here that a vow is a promise to do something, couched in the form of an oath, calling God to our witness. Common vows we take today are for baptism, marriage, and ordination. In a more indirect way, the Lord’s Supper includes elements of a vow as well.

### ***Purpose and content of vows***

“6. It is not to be made to any creature, but to God alone: 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 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.”

As with oaths in general, so vows are to be made only to God (Ps 76:11). In order to be acceptable, vows must be voluntary, springing from the heart. Normally, vows are made to God in order to emphasize thanksgiving (as in Ps 50:14), or to obtain a special request (as in Gen 28:20-22 and in 1 Sam 1:11). The vows taken are to either bind ourselves to already existing duties, or to activities consistent with them.

### ***Forbidden content of vows***

“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 or ability from God. 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.”

Vows should be reasonable and just, not sinful, as those in Mark 6:26 and Acts 3:12-14. A particularly heinous vow was that taken by forty men to murder the Apostle Paul, which plot the Sanhedrin leaders concurred with (Acts 23:12-15). Vows should take into account the ability of the person to fulfill them. Therefore, it is wrong to encourage people to take the superstitious monastical vows, which require things most people should not or even cannot give (Matt 19:11-12; 1 Cor 7:2, 9, 23; Eph 4:28). This same prohibition can be applied to secret vows required in Masonic orders. In the Old Testament God protected women and children from their own rash vows by allowing the husband or father to negate the vow (Num 30).

This section leads us to consider the vow of Jephthah. Some believe that he actually sacrificed his daughter; others that he dedicated her to tabernacle service and perpetual virginity (Judg 11:30-39). In any case, Jephthah is not praised for that as much as for being a man of faith in general (Heb 11:32).