

THE WESTMINSTER CONFSSION OF FAITH  
XXII. OF LAWFUL OATHS AND VOWS

Second Presbyterian Church, Greenville, SC

Pastor Rick Phillips

## I. LAWFUL OATHS

A lawful oath is a part of religious worship, wherein, upon just occasion, the person swearing solemnly calleth God to witness what he asserteth, opromiseth, and to judge him according to the truth or falsehood of what he sweareth.

# I. LAWFUL OATHS

- **Chapter XII reflects the Assembly’s high view of civil office and a Christian’s civic duty.**
  - There are occasions that call for us to summon God to bear witness to our oaths and vows.

“You shall fear the LORD your God. You shall serve him and hold fast to him, and by his name you shall swear” (Dt. 10:20).
  - Common examples today: weddings, church membership, covenant baptisms, and oaths of office.
- **Is there a “good kind of swearing”? (van Dixhoorn).**
  - Did Jesus forbid oaths?

“But I say to you, Do not take an oath at all. . . . Let what you say be simply ‘Yes’ or ‘No’” (Mt. 5:34-37).
  - Jesus was not forbidding oaths but forbidding frivolous oaths and urging honest speech. The Bible shows God taking oaths and calling his people to do likewise.
  - Since oaths are made in God’s presence, the proper context is that of worship.

## II. RATIONALE FOR LAWFUL OATHS

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.

## II. RATIONALE FOR LAWFUL OATHS

- **Vows should only be taken in God's name.**
  - God alone is Lord, ruling the conscience. To swear by some other authority is to usurp God's place. We take oaths in God's name as a way of summoning the Lord to bear witness to our promises and obligations.
  - Swearing in God's name carries holy implications:
    - Should not be rash or irreverent
    - Should be sincere and sober
    - Christians should discipline themselves not to develop the habit of vain swearing.
- **The Bible teaches oaths as a way of solemnizing promises**
  - "If a man sins against his neighbor and is made to take an oath and comes and swears his oath before your altar in this house, then hear in heaven and act and judge your servants" (1 Ki. 8:31-32).
  - "I made them take an oath in the name of God, saying, "You shall not give your daughters to their sons, or take their daughters for your sons or for yourselves" (Neh. 13:25).
  - "Ezra arose and made the leading priests and Levites and all Israel take an oath that they would do as had been said. So they took the oath" (Ez. 10:5).

## III & IV. GIVING OATHS AND VOWS

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.

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 anything 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.

# III & IV. GIVING OATHS AND VOWS

- **For what is true and good**

- Vows are to be taken only towards what is true and for swearing to do good.

“If you swear, ‘As the LORD lives,’ in truth, in justice, and in righteousness, then nations shall bless themselves in him, and in him shall they glory” (Jer. 4:2).

- To swear or vow towards evil is to invoke God’s wrath upon yourself.
- We must intend and be able (by God’s grace) to do what is vowed: “only something that we should do, can do, and plan to do” (van Dixhoorn).
  - Abraham’s servant and his vow to find a bride for Isaac (Gen. 24:2-9).

- **Must a lawful vow be made?**

- Original final line of WCF 22:3 – “Yet it is a sin, to refuse an oath touching anything that is good and just, being imposed by lawful authority.”
- One of the few changes in the American version of the WCF deletes this line, believing that it is not a sin to refuse a lawful vow based on conscience.

- **There is to be no equivocation in fulfilling oaths and vows**

- Legal devices are not to be employed to obscure or confound an agreed duty; nor can we justify breaking a vow if made to a non-Christian.
- Sinful vows should be repented (2 Sam. 25:22-34), but godly vows should be considered binding.

## V – VII. CHRISTIANS ARE TO BE VOW KEEPERS

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.
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 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.
7. No man may vow to do anything 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. 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.



## V – VII. CHRISTIANS ARE TO BE VOW KEEPERS

- The taking of vows recognizes that public and relational duties are of the highest importance, and recognizes that the infirmity of our nature is strengthened by public bonds.
- As such, Christians should keep their vows even when they involve personal difficulty or loss, simply because we vowed before the Lord.
- Vows are used superstitiously when they solemnize obligations or commitments that are contrary to God's Word and for which God has made no promise of help. Such vows impose folly under the appearance of wisdom.
- We are to be a people committed to keeping our promises, relying on the fact that God has kept his promises to us in Christ.