

**“Of Oaths and Vows”  
(WCF 22.3-4)**

**WCF 22.3** Whosoever taketh an oath, ought duly to consider the weightiness of so solemn an act, and therein to avouch [to maintain as just or true] 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. Yet it is a sin to refuse an oath touching anything that is good and just, being imposed by lawful authority.

**III. What are the conditions under which we may or must take an oath?**

**A. An oath is a serious matter and must not be taken lightly.**

1. It is made in the presence of God and in His name: “You shall not take the name of the LORD your God in vain, for the LORD will not leave him unpunished who takes His name in vain” (Exod. 20:7).
  - a. When we take an oath, we are acknowledging that God is.
  - b. We are also acknowledging who God is: the Holy One who bears witness to what we say and who will judge us if we don’t keep our Word.
  
2. Therefore, we should never enter into any kind of agreement unless we first understand the terms of that agreement, and are intent on doing what we say, because once we’ve made it, we are bound to keep it.
  - a. When we take an oath to affirm the truth of something, we must be fully persuaded that what we say is true:
    - (i) In a court of law, we take an oath that we will tell the truth. When we do, we had better be certain our testimony is true and not hearsay.
    - (ii) “And you will swear, ‘As the LORD lives,’ in truth, in justice and in righteousness; then the nations will bless themselves in Him, and in Him they will glory” (Jer. 4:2).
  
  - b. When we take an oath to do something, we must be resolved that what we swear is good, and that we can and will do it.
    - (i) Abraham did not require his servant to do anything sinful or that he was unable to do. Once the servant understood the terms and was satisfied that he could do what Abraham asked, he swore an oath.
    - (ii) “Abraham said to his servant, the oldest of his household, who had charge of all that he owned, ‘Please place your hand under my thigh, and I will make you swear by the LORD, the God of heaven and the God of earth, that you shall not take a wife for my son from the daughters of the Canaanites, among whom I live, but you will go to my country and to my relatives, and take a wife for my son Isaac.’ The servant said to him, ‘Suppose the woman is not willing to follow me to this land; should I take your son back to the land from where you came?’ Then Abraham said to him, ‘Beware that you do not take my son back there! The LORD, the God of heaven, who took me from my father’s house and from the land of my birth, and who spoke to me and who swore to me, saying, “To your descendants I will give this land,” He will send His angel before you, and you will take a wife for my son from there. But if the woman is not willing to follow you, then you will be free from this my oath; only do not take my son back there.’ So the servant placed his hand under the thigh of Abraham his master, and swore to him concerning this matter” (Gen. 24:2-9).

**B. We must take an oath when it is required by lawful authority in matters that are good and just.**

1. An oath may be required by the church to prove the truth or falsity of something.
  - a. The priest could require an oath from a woman accused of adultery as to her guilt or innocence.
  - b. “The priest shall have her take an oath and shall say to the woman, ‘If no man has lain with you and if you have not gone astray into uncleanness, *being under the authority of your husband*, be immune to this water of bitterness that brings a curse; if you, however, have gone astray, *being under the authority of your husband*, and if you have defiled yourself and a man other than your husband has had intercourse with you’ (then the priest shall have the woman swear with the oath of the curse, and the priest shall say to the woman), ‘the LORD make you a curse and an oath among your people by the LORD’S making your thigh waste away and your abdomen swell’” (Num. 5:19-21).
  
2. The magistrate may require an oath from a citizen to prove the truth or falsity of a charge.
  - a. This would be done in cases where there are no witnesses but God.
  - b. “If a man gives his neighbor a donkey, an ox, a sheep, or any animal to keep *for him*, and it dies or is hurt or is driven away while no one is looking, an oath before the LORD shall be made by the two of them that he has not laid hands on his neighbor’s property; and its owner shall accept *it*, and he shall not make restitution” (Ex. 22:10,11).

**WCF 22.4 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.**

**IV. What must be true of the oaths we take?**

**A. We must take them in the plain and common sense of the words we use, without equivocation, and without mental reservation.**

1. Equivocation is using a word or concept with a different meaning than what is expected.
  - a. For example: Through equivocation, we can prove that all cats have nine tails.
    - (i) No cat has eight tails.
    - (ii) Every cat has one more tail than no cat.
    - (iii) Therefore, every cat has nine tails.
  
  - b. Corrie ten Boom used equivocation when she answered the Germans at her door with regard to whether she was harboring any Jews:
    - (i) She said was hiding them under the table.
    - (ii) The Jews were “under the table,” but not as the Germans understood that phrase – they were under the floor under the table.
    - (iii) Through equivocation, Corrie seemed to be telling them the truth, but was not telling them the truth.
  
2. Mental reservation is adding mental qualifications to the words spoken, so that the words with the mental reservations are true.
  - a. Corrie could have said this, “No, there are no Jews in the house (at least not in the part of the house where you are now looking.”
  - b. Both equivocation and mental reservation were practiced in the Roman Church, particularly by the Jesuits. *The Confession* here condemns this practice.

3. Scripture tells us we must swear in truth/not deceitfully:
  - a. “And you will swear, ‘As the LORD lives,’ in truth, in justice and in righteousness; then the nations will bless themselves in Him, and in Him they will glory” (Jer. 4:2).
  - b. “Who may ascend into the hill of the LORD? And who may stand in His holy place? He who has clean hands and a pure heart, who has not lifted up his soul to falsehood and has not sworn deceitfully” (Psalm 24:3-4).

**B. Our oaths cannot bind us to sin.**

1. David made an oath, but then was dissuaded from keeping it; but he did not sin in breaking it – if he had kept the oath, he would have sinned.
2. “Now David had said, ‘Surely in vain I have guarded all that this *man* has in the wilderness, so that nothing was missed of all that belonged to him; and he has returned me evil for good. May God do so to the enemies of David, and more also, if by morning I leave *as much as* one male of any who belong to him.’ When Abigail saw David, she hurried and dismounted from her donkey, and fell on her face before David and bowed herself to the ground. She fell at his feet and said, ‘On me alone, my lord, be the blame. And please let your maidservant speak to you, and listen to the words of your maidservant. Please do not let my lord pay attention to this worthless man, Nabal, for as his name is, so is he. Nabal is his name and folly is with him; but I your maidservant did not see the young men of my lord whom you sent. Now therefore, my lord, as the LORD lives, and as your soul lives, since the LORD has restrained you from shedding blood, and from avenging yourself by your own hand, now then let your enemies and those who seek evil against my lord, be as Nabal. Now let this gift which your maidservant has brought to my lord be given to the young men who accompany my lord. Please forgive the transgression of your maidservant; for the LORD will certainly make for my lord an enduring house, because my lord is fighting the battles of the LORD, and evil will not be found in you all your days. Should anyone rise up to pursue you and to seek your life, then the life of my lord shall be bound in the bundle of the living with the LORD your God; but the lives of your enemies He will sling out as from the hollow of a sling. And when the LORD does for my lord according to all the good that He has spoken concerning you, and appoints you ruler over Israel, this will not cause grief or a troubled heart to my lord, both by having shed blood without cause and by my lord having avenged himself. When the LORD deals well with my lord, then remember your maidservant.’ Then David said to Abigail, ‘Blessed be the LORD God of Israel, who sent you this day to meet me, and blessed be your discernment, and blessed be you, who have kept me this day from bloodshed and from avenging myself by my own hand. Nevertheless, as the LORD God of Israel lives, who has restrained me from harming you, unless you had come quickly to meet me, surely there would not have been left to Nabal until the morning light *as much as* one male” (1 Sam. 25:21-34).

**C. We must be willing to pay them, even if it injures us in some way to do so.**

1. We must pay what we promise:
  - a. “When you make a vow to God, do not be late in paying it; for *He takes* no delight in fools. Pay what you vow!” (Ecc. 5:4).
  - b. Remember a vow is the of the same nature as a promissory oath.
2. And we must pay even if keeping our oath proves to work against us in some way.
  - a. Example: We might enter into an agreement to do some work for someone on a particular day at a particular time, but then have another opportunity presented to work

for someone else on the same day at the same time for more money. If the first person won't let us change the appointment, we must keep it, though we lose the additional money.

- b. The righteous man "Swears to his own hurt and does not change" (Ps. 15:4).

**D. We must not violate our oaths even if made to heretics or unbelievers.**

1. One of the arguments the Roman Church used to kill Jon Hus and to attempt to kill Martin Luther was 'faith did not need to be kept with heretics.'
  - a. A promise made to a heretic was not binding.
  - b. In other words, the promise of safe conduct that brought these men to the Councils/meetings did not need to be honored.
  
2. But God's Word says otherwise.
  - a. The Lord held Zedekiah, the king of Judah, responsible for an oath he had made to Nebuchadnezzar (an unbeliever). Because he broke it, judgment would come from Him through Nebuchadnezzar: "Say, 'Behold, the king of Babylon came to Jerusalem, took its king and princes and brought them to him in Babylon. He took one of the royal family and made a covenant with him, putting him under oath. He also took away the mighty of the land, that the kingdom might be in subjection, not exalting itself, *but* keeping his covenant that it might continue. But he rebelled against him by sending his envoys to Egypt that they might give him horses and many troops. Will he succeed? Will he who does such things escape? Can he indeed break the covenant and escape? As I live,' declares the Lord GOD, 'Surely in the country of the king who put him on the throne, whose oath he despised and whose covenant he broke, in Babylon he shall die. Pharaoh with *his* mighty army and great company will not help him in the war, when they cast up ramps and build siege walls to cut off many lives. Now he despised the oath by breaking the covenant, and behold, he pledged his allegiance, yet did all these things; he shall not escape.' Therefore, thus says the Lord GOD, 'As I live, surely My oath which he despised and My covenant which he broke, I will inflict on his head'" (Eze. 17:12-19).
  - b. Joshua and the leaders of Israel were required to keep the oath they made with the people of Gibeon: "The sons of Israel did not strike them because the leaders of the congregation had sworn to them by the LORD the God of Israel. And the whole congregation grumbled against the leaders. But all the leaders said to the whole congregation, 'We have sworn to them by the LORD, the God of Israel, and now we cannot touch them'" (Josh. 9:18-19).
  - c. When Saul finally broke that covenant years later, the Lord afflicted all Israel for his sin: "Now there was a famine in the days of David for three years, year after year; and David sought the presence of the LORD. And the LORD said, 'It is for Saul and his bloody house, because he put the Gibeonites to death'" (2 Sam. 21:1). It wasn't until that sin was atoned for by the house of Saul that God's judgment was removed.