

LORD'S DAY 37

101. Q. But may we swear an oath by the Name of God in a godly manner?

A. Yes, when the government demands it of its subjects, or when necessity requires it, in order to maintain and promote fidelity and truth, to God's glory and for our neighbour's good. Such oath-taking is based on God's Word¹ and was therefore rightly used by saints in the Old and the New Testament.²

1. **Deuteronomy 6:13** You shall fear the LORD your God and serve Him, and shall take oaths in His name.

Deuteronomy 10:20 You shall fear the LORD your God; you shall serve Him, and to Him you shall hold fast, and take oaths in His name.

Jeremiah 4:1-2 "If you will return, O Israel," says the LORD, "Return to Me; and if you will put away your abominations out of My sight, then you shall not be moved."² And you shall swear, 'The LORD lives,' in truth, in judgment, and in righteousness; the nations shall bless themselves in Him, and in Him they shall glory."

Hebrews 6:16 For men indeed swear by the greater, and an oath for confirmation is for them an end of all dispute.

2. **Genesis 21:24** And Abraham said, "I will swear."

Genesis 31:53 "The God of Abraham, the God of Nahor, and the God of their father judge between us." And Jacob swore by the Fear of his father Isaac.

Joshua 9:15 So Joshua made peace with them, and made a covenant with them to let them live; and the rulers of the congregation swore to them.

1 Samuel 24:22 So David swore to Saul. And Saul went home, but David and his men went up to the stronghold.

1 Kings 1:29-30 And the king took an oath and said, "As the LORD lives, who has redeemed my life from every distress,"³⁰ "just as I swore to you by the LORD God of Israel, saying, 'Assuredly Solomon your son shall be king after me, and he shall sit on my throne in my place,' so I certainly will do this day."

Romans 1:9 For God is my witness, whom I serve with my spirit in the gospel of His Son, that without ceasing I make mention of you always in my prayers,

2 Corinthians 1:23 Moreover I call God as witness against my soul, that to spare you I came no more to Corinth.

102. Q. May we also swear by saints or other creatures?

A. No. A lawful oath is a calling upon God, who alone knows the heart, to bear witness to the truth, and to punish me if I swear falsely.¹ No creature is worthy of such honour.²

1. **Romans 9:1** I tell the truth in Christ, I am not lying, my conscience also bearing me witness in the Holy Spirit,

2 Corinthians 1:23 Moreover I call God as witness against my soul, that to spare you I came no more to Corinth.

2. **Matthew 5:34-37** But I say to you, do not swear at all: neither by heaven, for it is God's throne;³⁵ nor by the earth, for it is His footstool; nor by Jerusalem, for it is the city of the great King.³⁶ Nor shall you swear by your head, because you

cannot make one hair white or black.³⁷ But let your "Yes" be "Yes," and your "No," "No." For whatever is more than these is from the evil one.

Matthew 23:16-22 Woe to you, blind guides, who say, "Whoever swears by the temple, it is nothing; but whoever swears by the gold of the temple, he is obliged to perform it."¹⁷ Fools and blind! For which is greater, the gold or the temple that sanctifies the gold?¹⁸ And, "Whoever swears by the altar, it is nothing; but whoever swears by the gift that is on it, he is obliged to perform it."¹⁹ Fools and

blind! For which is greater, the gift or the altar that sanctifies the gift? ²⁰ "Therefore he who swears by the altar, swears by it and by all things on it. ²¹ He who swears by the temple, swears by it and by Him who dwells in it. ²² And he who swears by heaven, swears by the throne of God and by Him

who sits on it.

James 5:12 But above all, my brethren, do not swear, either by heaven or by earth or with any other oath. But let your "Yes," be "Yes," and your "No," "No," lest you fall into judgment.



In Lord's Day 37, we deal with the matter of the oath. What is an oath? "A lawful oath," says the Catechism, "is a calling upon God to bear witness to the truth and to punish me if I swear falsely." This definition is very close to 1 Kings 8:31. "When anyone ... comes and takes an oath before Your altar in this temple, then hear in heaven, and act, and judge Your servants, condemning the wicked, bringing his way on his head, and justifying the righteous by giving him according to his righteousness."

One might wonder why a whole Lord's Day is dedicated to this topic. The answer lies in the historical setting of the Catechism. During the time of the Reformation, the Anabaptists declared that the oath was forbidden. They based this upon the words of Christ: "But I say to you, do not swear at all" (Matthew 5:34) and on the words of the apostle James, "But above all, my brethren, do not swear, either by heaven or by earth or with any other oath. But let your "Yes," be "Yes," and your "No," "No," lest you fall into judgment" (James 5:12).

The Catechism, however, refutes this error of the Anabaptists in Q&A 101. It is lawful to swear an oath. This is evident from the fact that it was used rightly by the saints in the Old and the New Testament.

- Abraham swore to Abimelech (Genesis 21:23).
- Jacob swore to Laban (Genesis 21:53).
- Joshua and the leaders of Israel swore an oath with the Gibeonites (Joshua 9:15).
- The Lord commanded Israel that they were to swear oaths in His Name: "You shall fear the LORD your God and serve

Him, and shall take oaths in His name (Deuteronomy 6:13).

- David swore to Saul (1 Samuel 24:22).
- Swearing oaths before God was expected in the administration of justice (cf. 1 Kings 8:31).

If there is any doubt remaining concerning the lawful use of the oath, then reference can be made to God who also used the oath when seeking to confirm the promise made with Abraham (cf. Genesis 22:16, Hebrews 6:13). God also swore an oath to David (cf. Psalm 110:4).

How, then, do we understand the words of Christ and James who both said, "Do not swear at all" (cf. Matthew 5:34, James 5:12)? Both Christ and James spoke out against the use of frivolous oaths which were used to confirm promises, but which were soon broken. When someone abuses something sacred, he loses the right to use it.

There was also another error concerning the oath in the time of the Reformation. Oaths were sworn in the name of saints. The saints were called upon rather than God to witness to the truth. This is the error which is refuted in Q&A 102.

The saints cannot serve as witnesses or as judges. They could not serve as witnesses because they cannot see what occurs in secret, neither can they know the thoughts which lie hidden in the depth of man's heart. God alone knows the secrets of a man's heart. "Can anyone hide himself in secret places, so I shall not see him?" says the LORD; "Do I not fill heaven and earth?" says the LORD" (Jeremiah 23:24). "Would not God search this out? For He knows the secrets of the heart" (Psalm 44:21; cf. also

2 Chronicles 6:30; Psalm 139:23; Jeremiah 12:3; Matthew 6:4,6,18; Acts 15:8).

When we swear by the Name of the LORD, we honour Him in two ways:

1. In the first place we acknowledge that God is the God of truth. God is ever faithful, and He hates the lie (cf. Zechariah 8:17). When we use His name to confirm the truth, we acknowledge God's truthfulness and faithfulness.
2. In the second place we acknowledge that God is the *omniscient witness*, who sees all and knows all. We also acknowledge Him as the *omnipotent, all-powerful Judge* of heaven and earth, before whom all men are tried, and by whom men are punished if they swear falsely.

Swearing an oath has **two purposes**:

1. In the first place, **an oath should stimulate men to speak the truth.** When an oath is sworn in the Name of the Lord, God is invoked as the final Judge. He is not like earthly judges, who are unable to look into a man's heart and determine whether he tells the truth. He is not like earthly judges, who sometimes err in their judgment, and may declare a guilty man innocent. God is not like earthly judges who may be forced to allow a man to go free because of insufficient evidence to convict, even though a "gut feeling" tells him that a man is guilty. An earthly judge has limitations, and men may try to evade the truth. But calling upon God should stimulate men to speak the truth, for God is both all-knowing and all-powerful. He is able to judge and to punish where earthly judges are beset with limitations. Furthermore, He will punish with greater wrath those who invoke Him as judge, yet proceed to give false testimony.
2. In the second place, **an oath serves to confirm what we say to others.** It is a fearful thing to swear by the Name of the LORD and then to lie. To do so is to bring God's wrath upon oneself. Thus if someone hears us swear an oath, he

may be more sure that what we say is the truth.

It stands to reason that the oath will hardly serve its intended purpose if those who swear by God's Name do not believe in Him. Nevertheless, it is good if our secular law courts demand the swearing of an oath, for a denial of God does not negate the fact that He truly does see in secret, and will punish those who give false testimony. Even though a man may deny God, yet he increases his condemnation if he swears by God's Name and then commits perjury.

The question then arises as to when an oath should be sworn. The Catechism begins by saying that oaths may be sworn when this is demanded by a judge (or magistrate), or when some other government official requires this. This is the most frequent use of the oath. In court, you are asked to swear an oath with one hand raised (and perhaps another hand upon the Bible). With this oath, you promise to tell the truth, invoking God to punish you if you swear falsely by telling a lie.

The Catechism also acknowledges that there may be other times when oaths are necessary. There may be times when our words will not be received except by means of an oath. If something very important is at stake, we may swear an oath and thereby ask God to bear witness to the truth. An oath may also be necessary when we make a very important promise. Then the oath will confirm the promise which we have made. When we make profession of our faith we make a promise before God and many witnesses. When we marry, we do the same. When we enter into an office in the church (minister, elder or deacon) we also make a promise *before God and His holy church*. These oaths of promise are called *vows*.

Oaths should not really be necessary. They are only necessary because man's nature has become corrupt through sin and because man loves the lie more than the truth.

He who uses the oath the most is often the one who is known to lie frequently. If your friend is accustomed to speaking the truth,

you have no reason to doubt him. But if he always twists the truth, and lies or breaks his promises, he will need to use oaths more and more because you trust him less and less. It is the liar who most often must say, "*I swear...!*"

be characterised by truth and faithfulness. It follows, then, that Christians should seldom need to use the oath. Our "*Yes*" or "*No*" should have the same character as an oath. We should always speak the truth before all men.

Through the grace of God we are recreated as new creatures after God's image. As God is true and faithful, our speech should



Questions

1. What is an oath?
2. Who taught that all oaths are forbidden? On what Scriptural basis did they teach this?
3. How is it evident to us that it is lawful to swear an oath? Give three of the most clear examples which prove that it is lawful to swear an oath.
4. How do we interpret the words of Matthew 5:34 and James 5:12, "*Do not swear at all*"?
5. What other error existed in the time of the Reformation concerning the oath? Why was this wrong?
6. In what two ways do we honour God when we swear by His Name?
7. What are the two purposes in swearing an oath?
8. Will an oath serve its intended person if the one who swears it does not believe in God? Should we still use it? Why (not)?
9. When is the oath chiefly used? At what other occasions is it used? What name do we give an oath of promise?
10. Why are oaths necessary? Who needs to use the oath most often? Should we as Christians need to use an oath very often?