



Thoughts from the Bible and Books Devotions from The Heidelberg Catechism

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101 **Q.** *But may we swear an oath in God's name if we do it reverently?*

A. Yes, when the government demands it, or when necessity requires it, in order to maintain and promote truth and trustworthiness for God's glory and our neighbor's good. Such oaths are approved in God's Word and were rightly used by Old and New Testament believers.

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

A. No. A legitimate oath means calling upon god as the one who knows my heart to witness to my truthfulness and to punish me if I swear falsely. No creature is worthy of such honor.

The Heidelberg Catechism takes eleven weeks to go through the Ten Commandments. The third commandment is the only one that gets two Lord's Days instead of one. And oddly enough, the extra Lord's Day for the third commandment deals with an issue that seems rather prosaic. With a hundred other pressing ethical dilemmas to choose from, frankly, the swearing of oaths seems like a pretty poor choice. After all, how many Christians have you known to read through the third commandment and stop dead in their tracks thinking: "But what about swearing oaths!"

Believe it or not, oath-swearing was a hot topic during the Reformation. For starters, the Reformers had to think through their pastoral counsel to ex-Catholics who had made monastic vows, often including the promise of lifelong celibacy, and now wanted to break those vows. Calvin considered these vows, since they were "rash" (i.e., based on future contingencies) and made with the intention of meriting God's favor, to be abominable in God's sight. Hence, they not only could be broken, those who made them were duty bound to repent of making them in the first place.

More important to the Catechism were the vows sworn to saints or angels. Whether the saints and angels were invoked out of superstition or as a

way to avoid full liability for the oath, the practice was seen as a violation of the third commandment. When we swear by someone, we are calling upon that person to search our hearts and judge us if we swear falsely (Q/A 102). Since God alone can know the heart and God is the one who will hold us accountable for matters of the heart, swearing by any other besides him is an affront to his authority. If I swear "on my mother's grave" (though thankfully she doesn't have one yet), I'm calling on my mother to vouchsafe my truthfulness and judge me if I lie. But my mom is not a searcher of hearts and she is not the Judge. Only God is "worthy of such honor" (see John 2:24, 25; 1 Cor. 2:11; Matt. 10:28). So to swear by anyone or anything besides him is to dishonor his name. "He who takes an oath in the land shall swear by the God of truth" (Isa. 65:16).

The other more pressing issue during the Reformation was whether oaths were lawful in the first place. The Anabaptist wing of the Reformation believed that Matthew 5:33-37 and James 5:12 forbade the use of any kind of oath. After all, Jesus said "Do not take an oath at all...Let what you say be simply 'Yes' or 'No'; anything more than this comes from evil" (Matt. 5:34, 37). And yet, the Heidelberg Catechism defends the use of oaths. Considering Jesus'

plain teaching, what justification do we have for swearing oaths, whether before a judge, or in a marriage ceremony, or in private conversation?

First, we need to look at Jesus' words in context. Just a few verses earlier, Jesus made clear that he did not come to abolish the law but to fulfill it (Matt. 5:17). His beef is not with the law—which commanded the people to serve God and hold fast to him, “and by his name you shall swear” (Deut. 10:20)—but with the human traditions added to the law. In particular Jesus is denouncing the common first century Jewish practice of swearing by something other than God. People would swear by heaven or the earth or by Jerusalem, thinking that this absolved them of the responsibility to keep the oath, since they technically didn't utter God's name. But as Jesus explains, these circumlocutions are nothing but thinly veiled hypocrisy. Heaven is the throne of God, earth is his footstool, and Jerusalem is his city. God is still the judge and searcher of hearts whether you utter his name or not. It's into this context that Jesus says, in effect, “Drop this whole oath business. It's gotten to be an exercise in falsehood. Just say what you mean and mean what you say. Enough with all your fancy formulations.” Jesus was almost certainly rejecting the manipulation of oaths rather than every kind of oath.

Second, it seems unlikely that Matthew 5 and James 5 were intended as complete prohibitions on all oaths because of how frequently oaths occur in both testaments. Abraham swore to the king of Sodom (Gen. 14:22) and to Abimelech (Gen. 21:24), and Abraham's servant swore to him (Gen. 24:2-9); Jacob swore “by the Fear of his father Isaac” (Gen. 31:53); the leaders of Israel swore to the Gibeonites (Josh. 9:15); Boaz swore to Ruth (Ruth 3:13); and David swore to Bathsheba (1 Kings 1:29-30). Even in the New Testament we see plenty of oaths. The Apostle Paul often called on God as his witness (Rom. 1:9; 9:1; 2 Cor. 1:23; Phil. 1:8; 1 Thess. 2:16). Not only that, Jesus frequently prefaced his statements with the emphatic assurance “truly, truly” and on one occasion swore “by the living God” that he was the Christ (Matt. 26:63-64). And then there's Hebrews 6:13-20 which not only speaks approvingly of people “swearing by something greater than themselves” (v. 16), but highlights God's own oath-taking (v. 13)! How could Jesus have intended to ban-

ish all swearing of every kind when we see the propriety of oaths so often in the Scriptures?

Third, the “reverent” use of oaths is appropriate when we consider the lawful ends of such swearing. Oaths, used sparingly and in the right context, can glorify God. If making an oath involves swearing by someone greater than ourselves, then to call on “God as my witness” is to call on him as our superior and judge. In oath-taking, we also confess that God knows the thoughts and intentions of our hearts (Psalm 139:1-6). As Jochem Douma puts it, “By swearing an oath, we are confessing our faith: God and nobody else, not even ourselves, functions as verifiers of our words.”

Reverent oaths also benefit our neighbors. When Jesus and James argued that anything beyond a simple “yes” or “no” comes from evil, they were probably thinking of the hypocrites who used oaths because they wanted to get out the truth, not because they wanted to be bound by it. But Jesus and James may have also been thinking more broadly of the evil world in which we live. If everyone could be trusted there would be no need for oaths. That's why oaths should be virtually unnecessary among Christians. Our word should be our bond. As Christians, we recognize God always searches our hearts whether we call on him as a witness or not. So in one sense, we are always under an oath to tell the truth. But since we live among truth-dodgers (outside and, unfortunately, inside the church) it is necessary and beneficial at times to swear an oath. Our society still respects oaths—whether it's before a judge or at the altar or upon taking public office or by signing your name on some dotted line. Oath-taking can promote the public welfare by encourage truth telling and holding liars accountable. This is but one example of God's common grace and one way in which Christians can act as leaven in the world and honor the Lord's name all at the same time.

~ Kevin DeYoung