

## LAWFUL OATHS AND VOWS ... & CIVIL GOVERNMENT

Is it necessary to consider such a subject as this within the context of our *Baptist Confession*? How relevant is it to our faith? Well, surely the keeping of our promises as members of society is one of the pillars of civilization. Governments are elected on promises, marriages are based upon promises, our church membership and its welfare depends upon the keeping of promises ... *promises* produce stability when upheld and are an integral part of the teaching of God's Word in relation to all things.

Oaths and vows ... Before we go any further, we need to draw a clear line of distinction between the definition of a vow and the definition of an oath. Theologically ...

- \* A *vow* is a *promise to God* to believe something, say something, do something or be something. [Vertical Commitment.]
- \* An *oath* is a *promise to another person* with God Who is called to witness the promise. [Triangular Commitment.]

The Bible teaches that each vow and each oath is recorded in Heaven; ... this is condensed for us in the *Confession*, *ch. 22* teaches us, "A lawful oath is an aspect of religious worship, in which the swearer, having God's truth, justice and righteousness in view, solemnly calls God to witness what he swears, and to judge him according to the truth or falsity of his words". In other words, we are worshipping God by acknowledging His Sovereignty in that He sees, hears and knows all things in every area of our lives. This means that the way we make and keep our promises is an indication of our walk with God.

There are some genuinely sincere believers who believe it is not right for Christians to make oaths or vows, - they would uphold their point of view from *Mt. 5:33* Again, ye have heard that it hath been said by them of old time, Thou shalt not forswear thyself, but shalt perform unto the Lord thine oaths: 34 But I say unto you, Swear not at all; neither by heaven; for it is God's throne: 35 Nor by the earth; for it is his footstool: neither by Jerusalem; for it is the city of the great King. 36 Neither shalt thou swear by thy head, because thou canst not make one hair white or black. 37 But let your communication be, Yea, yea; Nay, nay: for whatsoever is more than these cometh of evil.

However, the context in *Mt. 5:33-37* indicates that the people were swearing by created things, - *heaven, ... earth, ... thy head*, - rather than the Creator Himself, and they were making vows so frequently concerning unimportant matters in ordinary conversation, that their vows had become empty and meaningless. (It's like hearing someone saying, "For God's sake" when the use of the term is not worshipful, but instead it is using His Name in vain.)

On the other hand, the *Confession of Faith* makes it clear that “an oath is only lawful when it is taken in the Name of God, *with all holy fear and reverence*. To swear vainly or rashly by that glorious Name, or to swear at all by any other thing, is sinful and to be abhorred”.

It is a serious matter making oaths and vows; the Psalmist explained, [116:18 I will pay my vows unto the LORD now in the presence of all his people. ...](#)

- (i) he would **pay** that which he had promised to the Lord *absolutely*, - he would keep his word to the Lord *totally*;
- (ii) he would keep his promises **plainly**, - with no ‘second’ meanings, no smart undertones and no room for ambiguity, (*Confession*, “An oath is to be taken in the plain and usual sense of the words used, without equivocation or mental reservation”);
- (iii) he promised to keep his vows **presently**, i.e. *now*, not some time in the future when it would be considered more suitable or advantageous, but without excuses or delay;
- (iv) he promised to keep his vows **publicly** so that others could examine his honesty before God.

Now, ... what are the practical implications of these *Lawful Oaths And Vows*?

We can see these borne out in our second consideration this evening. With regard to *Civil Government* the *Confession* upholds the Biblical principle that [the powers that be are ordained of God \(Rom 13:1\)](#). Jack McConnell is the First Minister in Scotland because God has ordained him to be. Tony Blair, George Bush, and every other government leader anywhere in the world is in the position because of the ordinance of God (Rom. 13:2) [for there is no power but of God \(Rom. 13:1\)](#). ... And Gordon Brown will only become Prime Minister if he is so ordained by God.

The practical implication is also that our MP’s must swear an Oath of Allegiance to the Queen, - they must place their hand on the Bible (or Old Testament or Koran) and say, “I....swear by Almighty God that I will be faithful and bear true allegiance to Her Majesty Queen Elizabeth, her heirs and successors, according to law. So help me God.” Whether they accept it or not ... our MP’s are responsible before God for the laws they pass and the direction they guide our country.

At her coronation Queen Elizabeth II also made a vow in the presence of God, “I do solemnly, and in the presence of God profess, testify and declare that I am a faithful Protestant and that I will secure the Protestant succession to the throne of my realm”. She also promised, “to maintain to the utmost of my power the Laws of God, the true profession of the Gospel and the Protestant

Reformed religion established by law”. ... She is personally responsible before God for the vows she made that day.

The Bible says, [Rom. 13:6](#) they are God’s ministers, attending continually upon this very thing. Whether they recognise it or not, they have a solemn responsibility not only to the people, but to God Who has placed them in that position. Incidentally, we have personal charge from God’s Word to pray regularly [I Tim. 2:2](#) for kings and all those in authority, that we may live peaceful and quiet lives in all godliness and holiness. [3](#) This is good, and pleases God our Saviour.

In a legal court, witnesses and juries promise, “I swear by Almighty God that I will tell the truth, the whole truth and nothing but the truth”.

In the Church, Ministers, Deacons and members make promises in the sight of God. At the Induction Service we stand before God and make vows that we promise to keep.

In the marriage service vows are also made before God, ... and at baptism, ... and when we come into membership of the local church. We make these vows openly and publicly before Almighty God ... and we make oaths to those around us in the presence of God.

## Conclusion

- \* Now, let’s consider this:
  - \* What blessing would flow if we upheld every promise we made to God and every promise we made to others in His presence!
- \* Surely His favour would be upon our nation, our families, our church and upon our society.
- \* Jonathan Edwards is said to have made seventy resolutions that he read over every week. Among his resolutions were, “Never to do anything which I should be afraid to do, if it were the last hour of my life....To be endeavouring to find out fit objects of charity and liberality”.
- \* Our Bible study is simple this evening but it is nonetheless a serious matter that God keeps a record of the promises, vows and oaths we make and He holds us accountable. Solomon wrote, [When you make a vow to God, do not delay in fulfilling it. He has no pleasure in fools; fulfill your vow. Better is it that thou shouldst not vow, than that thou shouldst vow and not pay \(Eccles.5:4,5\).](#)
- \* Rather, may it be our testimony, [Ps. 66:13](#) I will pay thee my vows, [14](#) Which my lips have uttered, and my mouth hath spoken.