

## ORDINANCE OF COVENANTING.

(Vows and Oaths)

“[P]ublic, social covenanting, is an ordinance of God, obligatory on churches and nations under the New Testament.”—Fourth Term of Communion.

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Question 1.—*What ought we to think of vows?*

*Answer.*—Vows must be considered in connection with the subject of covenanting, Ps. 50:5, 14, 16. A vow is made to God alone, as various passages of Scripture make clear, Ps. 132:2; Num. 21:2. Likewise, this connection of the vow to God is manifest in the manner in which it is said to be made, Gen. 28:20-22; as well as the subject of the address when made, 1 Sam. 1:11. In only one passage is a vow represented as being made to another than God Himself, but there the judgments of God are denounced against men for making vows to the queen of heaven, for it involves them in the guilt of idolatry, Jer. 44:25, 26. Thus, once men who had been idolaters were instructed in the claims the LORD upon them and their obedience, they made vows to Him, Jon. 1:16.

A vow is a solemn promise made to God, Deut. 23:23; importantly, it is understood to be very much like unto a promissory oath, Num. 30:2. Therefore, Scripture declares that vows were paid to the LORD, by sacrifice and thanksgiving, Nah. 1:15; Ps. 61:8.

The verb “to make a vow” (*nādar*; נָדַר) arises from the literal sense of beating out, or threshing, grain, as attested in the Aramaic word “threshing-floor” (*’iddar*; אִדָּר), Dan. 2:35. It is cognate to the words for sowing, winnowing and scattering, (*zārā*; זָרָה, Ruth 3:2; *zāra*; זָרַע, Gen. 26:12). So, it came to signify falling out, or dropping down, as grain from the winnowing instrument upon the threshing-floor and, by extension, to offer willingly and freely, 2 Sam. 15:8. From this root is derived the word meaning to separate or consecrate (*nāzar*; נָזַר), Num. 6:2. The noun “vow” (*neder*; נֶדֶר) is put to denote the act of offering, or of making a promise, to God, Judg. 11:39. The vow, then, is sometimes made in a spontaneous effusion of gratitude, as David when God gave him rest from all his enemies, cf. Ps. 132:2, 3 and 2 Sam. 7:1-3. Moreover, vows are often made in order to obtain some benefit, Ps. 66:13, 14.

Vows must not be made which are inconsistent with the requirements of the Divine law because the LORD will not accept what He has forbidden, Mal. 1:14. Nor ought we to promise what is beyond our power, for that would be to mock the LORD, Lev. 27:8. Additionally, some vows of women and children are not accepted because they interfere with services which they owe to their families, Num. 30:6-8; or, in things lawful, that over which their husbands and fathers had superior power, Num. 30:3-5. All vows are made in the exercise of covenanting, as Jacob’s vow at Bethel, when he received God’s gracious covenant promise, Gen. 28:20-22; or Israel which testified that they agreed to the promise of the covenant made at Sinai, Ex. 34:11; when they made their vow at Hormah for deliverance, Num. 21:2, 3. So, a vow, like an oath, binds the soul, forming a bond (*’āsar*; אָסַר), Num. 30:9. This bond is a covenant bond (*māsoret*; מַסְרֵת), Ezek. 20:37.

Question 2.—*What ought we to think of oaths?*

*Answer.*—Oaths, too, must be considered in relation to covenanting, Gen. 26:28. To enter into an oath is the same as to give it, as also to swear, Gen. 26:3; Josh. 2:17. Now,

one of the Hebrew verbs denoting “to swear” (*’ālā*; אָלָה), Gen. 24:41; is derived from the word which signifies God (*’ēl*; אֵל; *’ēlōah*; אֱלֹהִים), Ps. 77:14; Deut. 32:15. God (*’ēlōhīm*; אֱלֹהִים), therefore, is a title which speaks of the nature of the Deity and indicates that the bond of unity between the Three Divine Persons (intra-Trinitarian) is not only natural, being rooted in the Father, John 5:26; but voluntary, dependent upon the mutual swearing of the Three Persons, Heb. 6:17. The corresponding noun for “oath” (*’ālā*; אָלָה) bears the meaning of calling upon the holy and sacred name, 1 Kings 8:31. Elsewhere, when a different Hebrew verb is used (*šāba*; שָׁבַע), the same concern to swear by the name of God appears, Gen. 24:3; Lev. 19:12. It is by the name of the LORD alone and by Him alone that we ought to swear, Deut. 6:13. The names of the gods of the heathen were not to be mentioned nor any creatures taken into such, Matt. 5:34-36.

The expression, *the LORD liveth*, is a form of oath taking, Jer. 5:2; 4:2. Moreover, the oath is to be taken with the lifting up of the right hand, Dan. 12:7; Rev. 10:5, 6. Whether the right hand is specifically mentioned, it is to be understood as being used, Isa. 62:8; and, in speaking of His promise to the children of Israel, it is called a swearing and the lifting of the hand, Ex. 33:1; Ezek. 20:28.

An oath is part of the worship of God and it is included in the exercises of such worship, Deut. 6:13; additionally, in a parallel passage, sacrifice appears in the place of swearing but swearing is not to do sacrifice, it is to perform another part of worship, 2 Kings 17:36. It is a form of calling on the name of God which is regarded as demonstrating a concern for devout obedience to Him, Isa. 45:23.

An oath is a solemn appeal to God, invoked as witness, that a statement is true, whether it be an assertion of fact or a promise, 2 Cor. 1:23. As such, an unregenerated man cannot be accepted in it, but a true Christian, in making an oath lawfully, will be approved of God, Rom. 1:9. *First*, when an oath is used in religious exercises strictly personal, it is sworn only to confirm the truth, Rom. 9:1. It is called an *assertory* oath because an assertion is made before God in giving adherence to the truth, acquiescing in it and implying an obligation to abide by it in solemn declaration of obligation to God, Gal. 1:20. Thus, Israel was invited to acquiesce in the truth contained in the words of God and, in so doing, to accede to His covenant, taking hold of it by faith in their assertory oath, Jer. 4:1, 2. *Second*, when an oath is given to confirm an assertion, by men having a right to claim it, those call upon the party to be sworn to promise to speak the truth and invoke God as witness, Heb. 6:16. The law of God requires the fulfilment of every promise made by man to man, Prov. 12:22; by appending an oath, God is appealed to as witness and judge, and made a party to the covenant between the oath taker and Himself so that an engagement to God as well as man is explicitly constituted, 2 Chron 6:22, 23.

When an oath is represented as a *promissory* oath, it is used in reference to obligation to be fulfilled in the future, Neh. 5:12. Whereas a vow is a promise made to God, Deut. 23:21, 22; an oath is a promise made to another wherein God shall require it no less than what is vowed to Himself, for both bind the soul, Num. 30:2. Thus, when the tribes of Reuben, Gad and Manasseh swore unto brethren, they testified to their conviction that a failure in fulfilling their promise would be a breach of an engagement to God Himself, Josh. 22:21-23.

Every giving of an oath for confirmation, whether of a statement of fact or of a promise to be fulfilled in the future, is in every case a taking hold on the covenant of God, for the hand lifted in the devotion of an oath, points out reconciliation and points to heaven

wherewith this oath binds to the covenant, Ezek. 17:18. Therefore, when men, in making a league or covenant with one another, lawfully vow or swear to the LORD, they covenant with Him, Ezek. 17:19. So, the covenant made between David and Jonathan, by swearing unto God, is a covenant of the LORD, 1 Sam. 20:8; 2 Sam. 21:7. Likewise, the covenant of marriage, made by vowing or swearing to the LORD, is recognized as a covenant of God, Prov. 2:17.

The civil or moral use of the oath, within a society, depends upon the spiritual character of that society, Gen. 26:28. The oath of an atheist or unbeliever is not necessarily of any value, Eccl. 9:2; for the individual who has no sense of responsibility to God for his actions will not always, if at any time, scruple to swear falsely, Ezek. 16:59. In civil and moral life, the presumption that a witness is competent should be based at least on the profession he makes regarding Divine truth, Ps. 14:1.

Finally, an oath is distinct from a vow: the latter is a solemn promise to God, Ps. 76:11; the former is an appeal to God, 2 Kings 11:4. The swearing of an oath always brings under obligation to God, and therefore always includes the making of a vow, Num. 30:10. When men covenant with one another, and appeal to God by oath, they come under an engagement to Him, and also an engagement to one another, Gen. 50:25; Ex. 13:19; or, they vow and swear to God, and promise and swear to one another, Gen. 31:13, 44. Thus, when an oath is enjoined, so is a vow, Josh. 2:17, 18; for that which is promised to God in the oath is a vow, Josh. 24:15, 24, 25.