

WESTMINSTER CONFESSION OF FAITH XXII

(Reading: Dt.10:12-22; Mt.26:63-64; Ac.18:18)

Why Your Word Is God's Action!

In its previous chapter the Westminster Confession of Faith dealt with worship. After going through the regular parts of the public worship service in Article 5 there - things like the reading of Scripture, the preaching, singing of psalms, the administering and receiving of the sacraments - it also mentioned irregular occurrences in public worship. It said that "religious oaths, vows, solemn fastings, and thanksgivings upon special occasions" can be found in public worship at certain times or seasons.

Chapter 22 turns now to more specifically consider these oaths and vows. "Religious" oaths and vows it calls them. And we need to note that. For these oaths and vows are specifically those which are made by Christians. They are the way which God gives so we may particularly dedicate ourselves to Him and to others. Thus our first aspect is about WHY WE SAY WHAT WE'RE GOING TO DO.

Why We Say What We're Going To Do

This is a key point. Because before starting to consider this whole area of oaths and vows we have to answer quite a strong Christian view against it. A view that believes it has the support of a passage in Scripture. A passage containing five verses found in no other than the great 'Sermon on the Mount' itself.

That passage is Matthew 5, the verses 33 till 37. There the Lord is telling us that we shouldn't be swearing by anything at all. He concludes that you should simply let your 'Yes' be 'Yes,' and your 'No,' 'No.' And so you will find some Christians who refuse to ever take an oath in a court of law or in any public ceremony of their church or society.

That's quite different to what you find in the Old Testament. In the Law of Moses there are frequent references to swearing using God's Name being done, and to how it must be done in the right way. Exodus 20 verse 7 is one of these. There the third commandment says, "You shall not misuse the name of the LORD your God, for the LORD will not hold anyone guiltless who misuses his name."

They were to use God's name in a right way. And that right way is what we read in Deuteronomy 10 verse 20. Moses says there, "Fear the LORD your God and serve him. Hold fast to him and take you oaths in his name."

Those Christians say that that doesn't apply anymore. They believe that God's people in the Old Testament were saved by works and not by grace. So they had to do things like this.

When you hear them it sounds plausible. And the words of Matthew 5:33-37 actually say that. Or so it seems.

Until, that is, we put it in context. For Christ in these verses wasn't doing away with the oaths of the Old Testament. He's not doing away with the law at all, as they say. Earlier in Matthew 5 verses 17 and 18 Jesus had clearly said that He wasn't here to destroy the law. Instead He's here to fulfil the law. And that's done when the law is wiped of all its false interpretations. Jesus is bringing out what the law is really meant to be.

You might be familiar with how many rules and regulations the Pharisees had put on top of the Law of Moses. Apparently there were more than six hundred of them. All those details about how you couldn't walk further than a stone throw on the Sabbath and so on.

Well, one of these false interpretations of the Jews was that only some oaths were binding, depending on what men swore by. So if you swore using the name of heaven it was a more important oath than if you your swore using something on earth. And those things had different grades depending on which degree you wanted to keep the oath.

Christ countered that. He said it was quite the opposite – all oaths are binding. But what's more than that is that men's words ought to be true and binding even without oaths. For when men were speaking like that you wouldn't need to feel you always had to swear it was true. And certainly you wouldn't have to push for the highest grade of thing that you could swear by. Don't many of us wish you could go back to the day when a man's word was his guarantee? Most contracts then involved no paper. There was the simple handshake and a deal was guaranteed to be done!

It's almost as if the Jews of Jesus' time had been reduced to what we used to do as kids. Perhaps you remember something like that when you tried to bolster up who you were with your friends by coming up with ever bigger and better things. So you've been to Adelaide. I've been to Sydney - twice!

You see, the Jews had essentially become self-centred. Their oaths and vows had become focused on them.

But WHY WE SAY WHAT WE'RE GOING TO DO is because we know that everything we do is done in the face of God. And isn't that especially what public worship is about?

When We Say What We're Going To Do

So let's see what it is that we're saying. In the words of a second aspect to Chapter 22 we note WHEN WE SAY WHAT WE'RE GOING TO DO.

Here we define what "oaths" and "vows" are. Because while Articles 1 and 5 tell us that they're of a religious nature it doesn't really spell out their differences.

Put simply, an oath is about man's duty to man. A vow is about man's duty to God.

In an oath man calls God to witness and to judge what he says or promises to men. Articles 2 and 3 spell that out.

This is what the Lord Jesus did in Matthew 26. There when the high priest said to Him, in verse 63, "I charge you under oath by the living God: Tell us you are the Christ, the Son of God," He replied in verse 64, "Yes, it is as you say."

In a vow man makes a solemn promise to God. Article 6 explains this. This is what the apostle Paul did in Acts 18 verse 18. There in an account of his second missionary journey we read, "Paul stayed on in Corinth for some time. Then he left the brothers and sailed for Syria, accompanied by Priscilla and Aquila. Before he sailed, he had his hair cut off at Cenchrea because of a vow he had taken."

In both oaths and vows it's tied in with a relationship to God. It has to come out of reverence for and obligation to God. So they can only made by those who believe in the one true and living God. And vice versa, those who don't believe in Him cannot properly swear by Him. It's quite appropriate, then, that our civil courts give you a choice as to how you swear to tell the truth - whether on the Bible or as an affirmation.

Oaths and vows are very serious things. They shouldn't be made lightly. Article 3 tells us to "consider the weightiness of so solemn an act."

We see that in Ecclesiastes 5, the verses 4 till 6. There Solomon says, "When you make a vow to God, do not delay in fulfilling it. He has no pleasure in fools; fulfil your vow. It is better not to make a vow than to make a vow and not fulfil it. Do not let your mouth lead you into sin.

And don't protest to the temple messenger, 'My vow was a mistake'. Why should God be angry at what you say and destroy the work of your hands?"

Notice how Solomon here ties in the vow with the temple. While we should be very careful what vows we make, when we do make them the assembly of God's people has a particular place. And that's what we see in the one vow that every true believer has to make and keep.

Scripture is clear about this particular vow. In Psalm 76 verse 11 it's bound on us: "Make vows to the LORD your God and fulfil them; let all the neighbouring lands bring gifts to the One to be feared."

So which vow is this? When do you have to vow to God and fulfil that vow and so be a witness to all those around you?

Well, what else could that be than your Profession of Faith? Isn't that especially WHEN WE SAY WHAT WE'RE GOING TO DO?

It's this about which the Lord Jesus says in Matthew 10 verse 32, "Whoever acknowledges me before men, I will acknowledge him before my Father in heaven." And it's this which the apostle Paul recognises of his young colleague in 1st Timothy 6 verse 12. There he exhorts him, "Fight the good fight of the faith. Take hold of the eternal life to which you were called when you made your good confession in the presence of many witnesses."

So vital is this vow that if one has not done it they will always have something missing in their lives. Mind you, they will say that it's because something's missing in their lives that means they can't do it. Or they'll say that it's too serious a vow for them to make. But make for whom? For you?

1st Timothy 6:12 says it's when you are called. Article 1 says it's about calling upon God. So if it's God who says that that's what He does; and He says it's what you have to do; and He blesses it when you do do it; and He gives you the strength and guidance to keep doing it; who are you to not do it?

Are you saying God doesn't keep His vows? Because that's the only reason you could have to not make the vow of professing your faith! Indeed, that's the only reason you could have for not making any religious oath or vow – the reason that it is because you're not spiritual at all.

And the more spiritual you are, you will find, like we read of Paul in Acts 18:18, that there are times of special dedication. Article 6 goes into different circumstances behind such a vow.

How We Say What We're Going To Do

And then we go on to see, in the third place, HOW WE SAY WHAT WE'RE GOING TO DO.

For this is what makes up what you are vowing. This is what the Articles 4 and 7 bring out.

And let's break this up into two sub-parts. So there is the part where we keep to what we say and the part where we keep to God's way in what we say.

Firstly, then, there is keeping to what we say. That means an oath is whole-hearted. You say it because you really want to mean it. Article 4 says that this means we do it "without equivocation, or mental reservation."

So what do you do if you have made an oath which you were sincere about at the time but later you think is wrong? Do you now have a few bad feelings about it?

Is it like after you brought that product from the shop but when you got home you didn't like anymore? Many shops will give you your money back. But they don't have to. And I wonder if those shops that do give it back aren't actually making morally lazy souls of us all? We should always be held to account. We have to be careful and considered about what we do. That's what an oath especially does.

So if there's nothing specifically sinful about the oath you have made you have to keep it. Break that and you've got some terrible consequences.

We can think here of the heavy penalties that go with perjury in a court of law, but there's also the punishment that there is if you break a spiritual vow.

And here we have the second part. For now we come to where we keep to God's way in what we say. You see, where there is something sinful in what you have sworn then you are actually obligated to confess that and remove yourself from that oath. One example given of this in Article 7 is the vow of celibacy in the Roman Catholic Church. For forbidding anyone to marry is said by the celibate apostle himself in 1st Timothy 4 to be taught by deceiving spirits.

The same has to be said about a vow of poverty. That vow renounces any ownership of private property. But it goes right against what another apostle, Peter, said in Acts 5 verse 4. There he told Ananias that the land he sold was his to sell.

But I think one of the worst examples of a religious vow would have to be the ones used by a particular group in our society. There a man reciting a particular solemn oath declares that if he in any way went against it, it would be "under the penalty of having my throat cut across, my tongue torn out by the roots and buried in the sands of the sea."

But it gets worse the higher up you go. Then the oath describes the penalty for those who reveal the secrets. This is the punishment "of being severed in two, of having my bowels burned to ashes, and those ashes scattered over the face of earth and water."

I'm sure some of you have realised whose oaths they are. They are said by those entering into and progressing within the Freemason movement. A movement which itself says there are many ways to heaven - Christianity being only one of them.

So the aspect about HOW WE SAY WHAT WE'RE GOING TO DO has to be also seen against where we say what we're going to do. Because as soon as you take it out of the public worship service and out of a direct obedience to the commands of Christ you start to get problems.

Don't forget - your word is God's action. What you say is who you are. That's why Article 4 says that there can never ever be a time when we don't do what we've promised. Even if we've said it to heretics and infidels - the worst people on the planet!

You have to be true, because it's Christ who is the truth. That's what Jesus said in John 14:6. And He lived showing that. Are you?