

God and the Swearing of Oaths

By Andrew V. Ste. Marie

“I am content.”

A twenty-four-year-old young man stood before the city council of colonial New York City and said these words. What was he content with? He was content to be put back in jail. For what cause? For refusing to disobey the words of Jesus.

Early in 1745, young David Zeisberger had set off with Christian Frederick Post to learn the language of the Mohawk Indians. The two young Moravian missionaries were arrested and charged with refusing to swear an oath of loyalty to the King of England. The colony of New York had a new law which stated that “Every Vagrant Preacher, Moravian, Disguised Papist [Roman Catholic], or any other person presuming to reside among and teach the Indians” who had no license and had not taken the oath “shall be treated as a person taking upon him to seduce the Indians from his Majesty’s interest.” The council read the new law to David, and asked him if he would take the oath. He replied, “I hope the honorable Council will not force me to do it.” They said, “We will not constrain you; you may let it alone if it is against your conscience; but you will have to go to prison again.”

“I am content,” David told them. So back into jail he went, with his companion, for a total of fifty-one days. “We count it an honor to suffer for the Saviour’s sake,” David wrote.

These two Moravians sat in a New York prison for standing against the swearing of oaths. For others, refusal to swear has led to death. How does God view the swearing of oaths? Is swearing really *that* bad – or might it be, as some suggest, an act of worship which is highly pleasing to God? What does Jesus say?

What is an oath?

Before discussing whether oaths are right, we must first understand what oaths are. Those who defend the swearing of oaths define an oath as “calling God to witness to the truth of a statement.” (We will see why they define it this way later.) However, Jesus had a different definition of oaths in Matthew 23:16-22.

In this passage, Jesus is rebuking the Pharisees for making rules concerning which oaths could be broken without guilt and which ones had to be kept inviolable. Notice what the Pharisees were swearing by: the temple,

the gold of the temple, the altar, and the gift on the altar. Obviously, these were oaths, and Jesus treated them as such. However, none of them were “calling God to witness”! We see then that this cannot be the true definition of an oath. There are two parts to an oath: 1) the oath itself (“I swear”) and 2) the confirmation: what is being sworn by. People swear by many things, for instance, “I swear to God” or “I swear by my mother’s grave.” Some even swear without a confirmation, just saying “I swear that...” There are the judicial oaths in courts, service oaths for public office or military service, and the Hippocratic oath for medical professionals. These are all oaths. The writer of the book of Hebrews affirms that oaths are sworn by something greater than the swearer and are used for confirmation of something asserted: “For men verily swear by the greater: and an oath for confirmation *is* to them an end of all strife” (Hebrews 6:16). We see in this verse that the purpose of oaths is for confirmation of a statement based on the authority or weight of something greater than the swearer.

First oath in the Bible

The first recorded oath in the Bible was given by a godly man, Abraham. In Genesis 21:22-31, we read the story including the following:

And Abraham said, I will swear ... And Abraham took sheep and oxen, and gave them unto Abimelech; and both of them made a covenant ... Wherefore he called that place Beersheba; because there they sware both of them.

The Law of Moses

Amid the flames, clouds, smoke, and trumpeting on Mount Sinai, God gave a covenant to Moses to give to the people of Israel. This law would be the standard of righteousness until the Messiah came to replace it. The Mosaic Law has plenty to say about oaths, and it is essential to understand exactly what the Law allowed and did not allow when we are discussing the subject of oaths.

Under the Law of Moses, oaths were permitted, and the children of Israel made extensive use of them in Old Testament times. In fact, under certain circumstances, the Law actually commanded the use of oaths. In Exodus 22:10-11, we read:

If a man deliver unto his neighbour an ass, or an ox, or a sheep, or any beast, to keep; and it die, or be hurt, or driven away, no man seeing *it*: *Then* shall an oath of the LORD be between them both ...

In this passage, we learn that if the animal was lost to the owner in some way, the man who was keeping it was to swear an oath that he was not guilty of stealing or destroy-

ing his neighbor's animal. This oath released him from being required to replace the animal for his neighbor. The neighbor was required to accept the oath as confirmation that his neighbor was innocent.

In the book of Deuteronomy 6:13-15 and 10:20-21, God includes swearing by His Name as part of the service which He desired from the Israelites and mentions it in the context of a rejection of idolatry.

Thou shalt fear the LORD thy God, and serve him, and shalt swear by his name. (Deuteronomy 6:13-15).

Thou shalt fear the LORD thy God; him shalt thou serve, and to him shalt thou cleave, and swear by his name. (Deuteronomy 10:20-21).

Oaths were also required in the service of the priests. Numbers 5 records what was to be done with a woman who was suspected by her husband of unfaithfulness. She was to be brought to the priest, who was to perform a ceremony to allow the Lord to reveal whether she was guilty or innocent. Part of this ceremony involved an oath:

And the priest shall charge her by an oath ... (Numbers 5:19-22).

Not only were oaths permitted and commanded in the Mosaic Law, God Himself made use of oaths on more than one occasion. For instance, in Jeremiah 22:5, God declares: "But if ye will not hear these words, I swear by myself, saith the LORD, that this house shall become a desolation." In Exodus 17, after a battle between the Israelites and the Amalekites, Moses built an altar and called it Jehovahnissi, "Because the LORD hath sworn that the LORD will have war with Amalek from generation to generation" (Exodus 17:16). (See also Deuteronomy 7:8; Psalm 110:4; Hebrews 6:13, 17; Isaiah 45:23).

So we see that not only were oaths permitted under the Law of Moses, they were actually required in some circumstances, and God Himself swore. Nevertheless, there were restrictions which were applied even under the Mosaic Law which are important to understand.

Restrictions on swearing

The Law of Moses strictly forbade false oaths—swearing to something which was not true, or swearing that a person would do something and then not doing it. If a man swore to do something and was unable to perform it, the Law considered it sin and required that he bring a trespass offering to the priest. Leviticus 5:4-6 and Numbers 30:1-2 speak of this, as well as swearing falsely in Leviticus 6:2-5 and 19:12.

The prophets, who called the people to return to the Lord and repent of their transgressions, also spoke against false oaths. Zechariah includes false oaths in a list of things which God declares that He hates.

These *are* the things that ye shall do; Speak ye every man the truth to his neighbour; execute the judgment of truth and peace in your gates: And let none of you imagine evil in your hearts against his neighbour; and love no false oath: for all these *are things* that I hate, saith the LORD (Zechariah 8:16-17).

In Malachi 3:5, those who swear falsely are put in the same list with sorcerers and adulterers. Joshua, near the end of his life, warned against swearing by the names of false gods.

That ye come not among these nations, these that remain among you; neither make mention of the name of their gods, nor cause to swear *by them*, neither serve them, nor bow yourselves unto them: But cleave unto the LORD your God, as ye have done unto this day (Joshua 23:7-8).

As can be seen, oaths were not a light thing among the ancient Israelites: they took oaths very seriously. An example of this is found in I Samuel 14. King Saul, in the middle of a battle with the Philistines, swore an oath: "Cursed *be* the man that eateth *any* food until evening, that I may be avenged on mine enemies" (1 Samuel 14:24). All the people, who "feared the oath" (verse 26), refrained from eating anything, even when passing by a piece of honeycomb dropped from the hive—except Jonathan, who had not heard of his father's oath. He nearly lost his life for eating when his father had rashly cursed anyone who ate that day.

Oaths were taken so seriously that any oath or vow which a woman made was subject to the approval of her husband or father, who could nullify her oath or vow if he so chose (Numbers 30:3-16). So we see that with some important exceptions, oaths were permitted and even required under the Old Covenant. But the day came when the reign of the Law of Moses ended.

A new kingdom

"Repent ye: for the kingdom of heaven is at hand," cried John the Baptist (Matthew 3:2). People from all over Judaea flocked to hear this man, dressed in camel's hair, preach about the coming of the new kingdom. Then one day John greeted the King himself with these words: "Behold the Lamb of God, which taketh away the sin of the world" (John 1:29b). "The law and the prophets were until John," Jesus later said; "since that time the kingdom of God is preached, and every man presseth into it" (Luke 16:16). The reign of Moses' Law had ended, and the King was here to establish the laws by which His kingdom would operate. Among the laws which He set up was a radically different standard on the swearing of oaths.

Jesus' words on oaths

Jesus addressed the subject of oaths in the most influential sermon of all time, the Sermon on the Mount. In Matthew 5:33-37, we read:

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: But I say unto you, Swear not at all; neither by heaven; for it is God's throne: Nor by the earth; for it is his footstool: neither by Jerusalem; for it is the city of the great King. Neither shalt thou swear by thy head, because thou canst not make one hair white or black. But let your communication be, Yea, yea; Nay, nay: for whatsoever is more than these cometh of evil.

Jesus made clear the radical new standard which He was requiring of those in His Kingdom—no oaths at all, for any purpose, in any way. “Swear not at all,” has nothing unclear about it.

James' words on swearing

Jesus was not the only one to instruct the citizens of the kingdom of God to abstain from swearing. The Apostle James wrote:

But above all things, my brethren, swear not, neither by heaven, neither by the earth, neither by any other oath: but let your yea be yea; and *your* nay, nay; lest ye fall into condemnation (James 5:12).

In this verse, we again find the answer to the question “does God want His children to swear oaths?” James tells us “swear not,” and then instructs us to avoid swearing by heaven, earth, or “by any other oath.” “Any other” would include swearing by God Himself.

This verse also gives us the answer to the question “is the subject of swearing really all that important?” The letter of James discusses many topics—responding to the trials of life, partiality, the relationship of faith and works, controlling our tongues, strife, separation from the world, wealth, etc. These are undoubtedly important issues. Nevertheless, when he arrives at the topic of swearing, he begins with “But above all things, my brethren” ... in other words, this one topic is more important than anything else discussed in the entire book!

What were they forbidding?

In spite of the clear instructions given by Jesus and James, there are some today—and there have been some through the centuries—who insist that the swearing of oaths is permissible, or perhaps even highly pleasing to God. They insist that what Jesus and James were actually forbidding was only false and frivolous oaths—not any oath at all. This view has some serious problems.

First, if they meant to forbid only false and frivolous oaths, why did they not say that they were forbidding false and frivolous oaths? Secondly, why did they use such absolute language: “Swear not at all,” “swear not ... by any other oath”? Thirdly, Jesus was clearly following the pattern of the other sections in the Sermon on the Mount where He raised the standards of the Law of Moses (“Ye have heard that it was said by them of old time ... but I say unto you”). The Law of Moses forbade false oaths, as we have seen; if Jesus only forbade false oaths, He would not have raised the standard at all.

Did Paul swear?

Those who defend the swearing of oaths point to the epistles of Paul, claiming that he swore several times in his writings. The verses quoted here are used to support this claim:

- 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 (Ro. 1:9).
- I say the truth in Christ, I lie not, my conscience also bearing me witness in the Holy Ghost (Ro. 9:1).
- But *as* God *is* true, our word toward you was not yea and nay (2 Corinthians 1:18).
- Moreover I call God for a record upon my soul, that to spare you I came not as yet unto Corinth (2 Corinthians 1:23).
- The God and Father of our Lord Jesus Christ, which is blessed for evermore, knoweth that I lie not (2 Corinthians 11:31).
- Now the things which I write unto you, behold, before God, I lie not (Galatians 1:20).
- For God is my record, how greatly I long after you all in the bowels of Jesus Christ (Philippians 1:8).
- For neither at any time used we flattering words, as ye know, nor a cloke of covetousness; God *is* witness (I Thessalonians 2:5).
- Whereunto I am ordained a preacher, and an apostle, (I speak the truth in Christ, *and* lie not;) a teacher of the Gentiles in faith and verity (1 Ti. 2:7).

What is it in these verses which lead some to believe that the Apostle Paul swore oaths? Do you remember that those who defend the swearing of oaths define an oath as “calling on God for confirmation”? In all of these verses, Paul calls on God to confirm what he is saying. Those who defend oaths, then, take these statements as oaths, and as confirmation that it is perfectly acceptable to God to swear oaths. But God is not the author of confusion.

As we pointed out before, their definition of the word oath is faulty, and thus their conclusion regarding these

verses is also faulty. Although Paul did call on God to confirm his words, he did not use oaths (saying “I swear”).

Whenever a teaching of Jesus seems to be contradicted by Paul, we must find a way to harmonize the two which leaves Jesus’ words supreme—not the other way around. Jesus is the King, and the servant is not greater than his master (John 13:16, 15:20)—even if that servant is the great Apostle Paul. Of course, Paul’s writings never do contradict Jesus’ words.

The early church on oaths

We have seen that whereas the Old Covenant allowed and even required some oaths, they are strictly forbidden under the New Covenant of Jesus Christ. The early Christians of the first two generations after the apostles held to this view.

Justin Martyr, about the year 160 A.D., wrote, “And with regard to our not swearing at all, and always speaking the truth, He commanded as follows: ‘Swear not at all.’” Irenaeus (student of Polycarp, who was a student of John the Apostle) wrote: “He commanded them not only not to swear falsely, but not even to swear at all.” Tertullian wrote, “Of perjury I am silent, since even swearing is not lawful.”

The early Anabaptists

The early Anabaptists (Dutch Mennonites, Swiss Brethren, and Hutterites) took firm stands against the swearing of oaths. Their writings on the subject are well worth reading, because they faced several of the same objections which we do today when we insist on obedience to Christ’s teachings on this subject.

The Schleithem Confession (written 1527), the earliest Anabaptist confession of faith, was written by the Swiss Brethren and took a strong stand against oaths:

We are agreed as follows concerning the oath: The oath is a confirmation among those who are quarreling or making promises. In the Law it is commanded to be performed in God’s Name, but only in truth, not falsely. Christ, who teaches the perfection of the Law, prohibits all swearing to His [followers], whether true or false,—neither by heaven, nor by the earth, nor by Jerusalem, nor by our head,—and that for the reason which He shortly thereafter gives, For you are not able to make one hair white or black. So you see it is for this reason that all swearing is forbidden: we cannot fulfill that which we promise when we swear, for we cannot change [even] the very least thing on us.

Now there are some who do not give credence to the simple command of God, but object with this question: Well now, did not God swear to Abraham

by Himself (since He was God) when He promised him that He would be with him and that He would be his God if he would keep His commandments,—why then should I not also swear when I promise to someone? Answer: Hear what the Scripture says: God, since He wished more abundantly to show unto the heirs the immutability of His counsel, inserted an oath, that by two immutable things (in which it is impossible for God to lie) we might have a strong consolation. Observe the meaning of this Scripture: What God forbids you to do, He has power to do, for everything is possible for Him. God swore an oath to Abraham, says the Scripture, so that He might show that His counsel is immutable. That is, no one can withstand nor thwart His will; therefore He can keep His oath. But we can do nothing, as is said above by Christ, to keep or perform [our oaths]: therefore we shall not swear at all.

Then others further say as follows: It is not forbidden of God to swear in the New Testament, when it is actually commanded in the Old, but it is forbidden only to swear by heaven, earth, Jerusalem and our head. Answer: Hear the Scripture, He who swears by heaven swears by God’s throne and by Him who sitteth thereon. Observe: it is forbidden to swear by heaven, which is only the throne of God: how much more is it forbidden [to swear] by God Himself! Ye fools and blind, which is greater, the throne or Him that sitteth thereon?

Menno Simons, in a book which he wrote against Reformed theologian Martin Micron, wrote:

That these things are so your unscriptural glosses [comments, explanations] concerning the oath make plain. Christ says, 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; but I say unto you, Swear not at all; neither by heaven, for it is God’s throne: nor by the earth; for it is his footstool. Matt. 5:33-35. And you, Micron, say that nothing but light-minded, false oaths are hereby prohibited, as if Moses allowed Israel to swear light-mindedly and falsely, and that Christ under the New Testament merely forbade these, notwithstanding that all intelligent readers know that it was not merely allowed Israel to swear truly but it was also commanded them to do so. Lev. 19:12; Deut. 10:20.

If the Israelites then, as you hold, had the liberty in this matter that we have, and if it be such a glorious thing and an honor to God rightly to swear by the name of God, as you make bold to lie against

your God, then tell me (Dear Micron) why Wisdom did not say, You have heard that it hath been said to them of old, Thou shalt not forswear thyself, and I say the same thing. Instead Christ says, Moses commanded not to forswear thyself, but I say unto you, Thou shalt not swear at all.

In another book, Menno wrote:

Nearly everything which is transacted before the magistracy must be affirmed by an oath, although the Lord has so plainly forbidden the swearing of oaths to all Christians. Matt. 5:34 ... He has plainly forbidden us to swear, and pointed us to yea and nay alone. Therefore it is that through fear of God we do not swear, nor dare to swear, though we must hear and suffer much on that account from the world ... it should be observed that Christ Jesus does not in the New Testament point His disciples to the Law in regard to the matter of swearing—the dispensation of imperfectness which allowed swearing, but He points us now from the Law to yea and nay, as to the dispensation of perfectness, saying, Ye have heard that it hath been said by them of old time (that is, to the fathers under the law by Moses), Thou shalt not forswear thyself, but shalt perform unto the Lord thine oaths (that is, thou shalt swear truly and fulfill thine oath): but I (Christ) say unto you my disciples, Swear not at all (that is, neither truly nor falsely), neither by heaven, for it is God's throne, nor by the earth, for it is his footstool, neither by Jerusalem, for it is the city of the great King. Neither shalt thou swear by thy head because thou canst not make one hair white or black. But let your communication be yea, yea; nay, nay; for whatsoever is more than these cometh of evil. Here you have Christ's own doctrine and ordinance concerning swearing.

Peter Reidemann, an early Hutterite leader, wrote:

Therefore Christ, in order to drive away the shadows that the light of truth—which light He is Himself—may shine upon us, cometh and saith, 'Ye have heard that it hath been said to them of old: Thou shalt swear no false oath but shalt perform thine oath unto God. But I say unto you that ye swear not at all; neither by heaven; for it is God's throne: nor by the earth; for it is his footstool: nor by Jerusalem; for it is the city of the great King. Neither shalt thou swear by thy head, because thou canst not make one hair white or black. But let your yea be yea; and your nay, nay: for whatsoever is more than these cometh of evil'—that is the devil.

Now, if one should say, as they all interpret it, false and superficial swearing is forbidden, but when one sweareth out of love, necessity, and the profit of one's neighbour, it is well done and not wrong—this happeneth when human reason goeth before the knowledge of God, and where human cleverness desireth to rule over the Spirit of God, and not allow itself to be controlled by the same. For just so did Eve look at the forbidden fruit, and chose the same at the counsel of the serpent, which she followed more than the counsel of God, therefore was she deceived by its cunning and led into death. So it is still: whosoever will please men cannot be Christ's servant. For truly here one cannot let reason rule or twist the scriptures in accordance with human presumption or opinion, for that is futile, but one must give God the honor and leave his command unaltered ... Therefore saith James, 'Above all things, dear brothers, swear not, neither by heaven, neither by the earth, neither by any other oath: but let your yea be yea; and your nay, nay; lest ye fall into hypocrisy.' Here James will have no oath at all, whether small or great, to avoid hypocrisy. Therefore, let men twist it as they will and dress it up and adorn it as they may, no good will be found in human swearing, for Christ himself saith, 'Let your speech be, Yea, yea; Nay, nay: for whatsoever is more than these cometh of evil.' The evil one, however, is the devil, that teareth good from the heart of men and planteth evil.

The Dortrecht Confession (also known as the 18 Articles of Faith), written by the Dutch Mennonites in 1632, states in Article 15:

Regarding the swearing of oaths, we believe and confess, that the Lord Jesus has dissuaded his followers from and forbidden them the same; that is, that he commanded them to 'swear not at all,' but that their 'Yea' should be 'yea' and their 'Nay nay.' From which we understand that all oaths, high and low, are forbidden; and that instead of them we are to confirm all our promises and covenants, declarations and testimonies of all matters, merely with 'Yea that is yea,' and 'Nay that is nay;' and that we are to perform and fulfill at all times, and in all things, to everyone, every promise and obligation to which we thus affirm, as faithfully as if we had confirmed it with the most solemn oath. And if we thus do, we have confidence that no one—not even the government itself—will have just cause to require more of us. Matt. 5:34-37; James 5:12; II Cor. 1:17.

Application for today

To take a stand against swearing oaths is, at first glance, not nearly as costly a decision today as it was for the early Anabaptists. They decided to stand with Christ on this issue at risk of life and limb. Today, if we want to take a stand against oath-swearing, we simply ask to affirm instead of swear if necessary, and no one seems to care. Nevertheless, Jesus' teachings about oaths ought to affect our lives profoundly.

Jesus wants our yes to be yes and our no to be no. James says the same thing. Our speech ought to be so reliable that we do not need oaths to confirm what we say. We should be known as honest people because Jesus has transformed our lives. We do not need oaths anymore because everyone knows that whatever we say will be true and reliable.

We also must be careful in our everyday speech to avoid oaths. Interjecting "I swear" into a conversation is an oath, a violation of the command of Jesus Christ. Such expressions as "by George," "by Jove," or even "by golly" are abbreviated oaths—the confirmation without the swearing. If we use these expressions, perceptive people will not take us seriously when we say we do not believe in swearing oaths. Furthermore, they are, in and of themselves, violations of Jesus' commandments and therefore sin.

Lying and exaggeration must be completely eradicated from our speech. Otherwise, we open ourselves up to the criticism that we refuse to swear because we know we are not telling the truth. May such things never be heard. Rather, may all know that we refuse to swear oaths because we have accepted the kingdom of God, with its high standard of honesty, and are following the commands and teachings of Christ and the Apostles which forbid oaths—and everything we say is scrupulously honest and, as God grants power, within the standards of righteousness which He has set for His kingdom.

May we earnestly pray to God that He would tame our tongues. "But the tongue can no man tame; *it is* an unruly evil, full of deadly poison" (James 3:8). God can tame it for us, and a tamed tongue must be one of the most remarkable proofs of a regenerated life. "For in many things we offend all. If any man offend not in word, the same *is* a perfect man, *and* able also to bridle the whole body" (James 3:2). ~

This article was slightly abridged to make it fit into the available space in this issue.

Nothing of major importance was removed.