

Bound by an Oath

“Let your yes be yes”

After the four questions were asked, each of us gave our "I do". We are now bound by an oath. We have sworn an *oath*, and can no longer back out; we have pledged ourselves for life.

Is it actually proper to swear an oath? Didn't the Saviour say in the Sermon on the Mount:

But I say to you, Do not take an oath at all, either by heaven, for it is the throne of God, or by the earth, for it is his footstool, or by Jerusalem, for it is the city of the great King. And do not take an oath by your head, for you cannot make one hair white or black. Let what you say be simply 'Yes' or 'No'; anything more than this comes from evil. (Matthew 5:34-37)

This text has always been used by sects that claim that swearing of any oath is evil and denies the Lord's property rights to all of life. However, they do not really understand the meaning of this passage from the Sermon on the Mount. In the days that the Lord Jesus was on earth, the Jews *did* teach that swearing by the name of God implied a promise that could not be broken. But in their cunning they tried to escape the binding nature of their oaths. So they said: if we *don't* swear by the name of God, but swear by "all that is dear to us" for instance, then we have a way out. Then we can *pretend* to swear a real oath with all its force and seriousness. So they would say: "by heaven!" or "by the earth!" or "by Jerusalem!" or "I'll give my head if it isn't true!"

Then it *sounded* like the swearing of a real oath. And yet, if they got caught telling lies and cheating, they could excuse themselves by saying: Yes, but I did not swear by God's name, so it was not a real oath. I did not commit perjury before the Lord!

Yes – plus something more

You see, swearing that kind of an oath is what Jesus forbids his disciples to do! He strongly opposes that Jewish use of oaths. He teaches them that God exercises his Lordship over all things: heaven

is his, he is master of the earth, Jerusalem is his city, and all parts of the human body are his property. Always and everywhere man faces his God, is in his presence. And therefore man may not speak with more than yes, or with more than no. He may not say yes plus something else, or no, while holding something back. If we wish to emphasize our words this way, while at the same time secretly thinking: "I can get out of this if I want to!" – then such talk is evil, from the world of sin, in which man tries to withdraw from the presence of God. Such ways of speaking are wrong. They only make man more false than he already is. They give the appearance of being seriously meant, but in reality are hypocrisy and falseness.

The absolute level

What does the Saviour now do? He lifts up those who belong to him to the level of the kingdom of heaven. He says: all decisions must be brought to that height, to the level of the kingdom. Ultimately the absolute choice must be made: for or against; Christ or Satan; heaven or hell. For all things are subject to the established laws of the kingdom of God, and all things come under the absolute Lordship of God.

It is clear that when the government, in the midst of a godless and corrupt world, demands an oath to confirm faithfulness and truth, it is because every man is corrupt by nature. God the Lord must be honoured in this oath as the truthful and faithful One. Then we, too, must be consciously willing to take the oath of truthfulness in the presence of God, in the midst of this world, in public life!

It *is* different in the church! In the church no special swearing of an oath should be necessary, for on the absolute level of the kingdom of heaven each "yes" and each "no" will have the force of an oath. That means: all that is spoken and agreed upon in the church, while praying for the blessing of God, who has the property rights and who promises to permanently hear the prayer of his people, that is an oath. Therefore we may not be false in our oaths!

The force of an oath

Each "yes" that is publicly spoken in the church has the force of an oath. This is true at baptism; this is true at a marriage; this is true for the installation of office-bearers.

It is also true when we have to answer the four questions. The "I do" that you say personally, when your name is called, is not just a polite answer; you pledge yourself with an oath. You are saying: "Lord, I promise this before you. Punish me if I don't live up to my commitment!" That promise is an *oath*. In the kingdom of heaven that is how it is.

For in the mouth of the Saviour, who is the faithful witness, whose yes was "yes" and whose no was "no", whose food and drink it was to do the will of his heavenly Father, falsehood was never found. He bought us to be his possession.

He now exercises his Lordship over all the length and breadth of our lives. There is no area in our lives, public or hidden, which is not subject to him. Therefore, the person who makes profession of faith accepts tremendous responsibility.

He is saying: "Lord, may you punish me if I swear falsely." But at the same time he says: "Lord, yes I am the man, who pure of heart and pure of hand, bans falsehood from his life and does not practice deceit in his oaths!"

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