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The Oath, the Bond of Civil Society.

BY REV. W. J. COLEMAN, D.D.

Society rests on confidence. The home, where all society begins, rests on the mutual confidence of husband and wife, of parents and children. The watchword of the Church is faith, the faith that leads to confidence in brethren and is founded on confidence in Christ. In business markets grow dull and panic comes when confidence is lost and no credit is given. The same is true of the state. What is patriotism, what is loyalty but confidence in one another, in our country, in our cause and in our God? When confidence is gone the state will disintegrate. Our greatest danger to-

day is a lack of confidence founded only too surely on the untrustworthiness of men in politics. The great aim of all true moral reformation is to make strong the bonds of civil society by building up confidence on the basis of God's law and the authority of Christ, the only true basis, and to secure this basis in the hearts of loyal Christian men and women.

Confidence in turn must rest on truthfulness. It must have a basis of reality and is not to be drummed up by empty exhortation. The man who has confidence in untruthfulness is only being deceived to his hurt. He is leaning on a broken reed that will pierce his hand. A nation that goes on in unqualified optimism, trusting that all things are well when there is much that is wrong that needs to be righted, is deceiving itself and will one day come to a great awakening. Trust rests rightly on what is trustworthy: true confidence on the truth.

THE PURPOSE OF THE OATH.

What means, then, can we employ that will bind men to the truth? What mort-

gage can we execute on a man's mind that will hold him to his engagements? What can be devised that will reach into a man, stir up his conscience, stand before his hopes of the future, set him face to face with God and bind him to truthfulness? What we need is a sure basis for confidence, the confidence that will bear up and sustain society.

The great means that has been devised to this end is the oath, that men shall swear in the name of the great and dreadful God that, by his help and as they shall answer to him on the great day, they will tell the truth and will keep faithfully the pledges which they have made. So great has been felt to be the need, and so well has the oath been found to answer the purpose, that its use to this end is well-nigh universal. Its history in every nation runs back beyond the record and memory of man. It is found in all the world and is most used in civilized countries, for there life is more complex and confidence is more needed. Nor is the oath a mere worldly expedient of human invention. The oath and act of swearing is found re-

corded in two hundred and sixty-nine passages in the Bible and the oath of God himself, given to make sure the confidence of believers, is found or referred to in nearly one hundred texts. "Wherein God, willing more abundantly to show unto the heirs of promise the immutability of his counsel, confirmed it by oath; that by two immutable things in which it was impossible for God to lie, we might have a strong consolation, who have fled for refuge to lay hold upon the hope set before us."

The oath is used in every step of the civil life of this country. The alien who would become a citizen must swear the oath of allegiance. A legislator or congressman, though elected unanimously, cannot vote on a single measure until he has taken the oath to the Constitution. Every officer, from President to constable, qualifies for his office by swearing to carry out the law. When a civil court is convened the judge has been sworn to rule according to law, the jury sworn to decide according to the law and the evidence, and every witness sworn to "tell the truth, the whole truth, and nothing

but the truth, as he shall answer to God at the great day." When a return of property is made every citizen may be called on to swear that he is concealing nothing that should be taxed. The soldier who enlists swears fidelity to his country and obedience to his superiors. Everything in civil life depends upon the oath, because everything depends on the truthfulness of men. The purpose of the oath is to make this sure. How can anyone think of separating the state from religion when everything in the state depends by common consent upon an appeal to God?

It is, above all things, needful that all men who take the oath be brought to see its solemn and dreadful character. If this were deeply impressed on the mind of all, there would be a great increase in its power to hold men right and secure truth and fidelity. The most important and fitting means to accomplish this end is to understand clearly

THE NATURE OF AN OATH.

Let us consider the oath, first, as a *religious confession*. The simplest defini-

tion of an oath is a solemn declaration made with an appeal to God for the truth of what is declared. The appeal to God is of the essence of the oath. Without that it would be only a promise. As a religious confession it puts first and foremost the existence of God. One who does not believe in a God is not allowed to take an oath. It would be with him an empty form. One who takes an oath "must believe that God is." Then there is belief confessed in a living personal God, for none other could take knowledge of a person and deal with a person. After this there is belief in a God who sees and knows what has taken place and who watches what will take place. The God invoked in the oath is an omniscient God who sees all things and persons and who knows what we say and do. This God of the oath is invoked also as a holy God who hates lying, who abhors falsehood and who will turn against the man who violates his oath. Why should it be considered a safeguard to invoke God, if he would not scorn and despise a lie? Following this closely and of necessity comes the

confession that the God of the oath is just. He will punish falsehood. The evil doer shall not escape his righteous judgment for he will not hold him guiltless, whatever inducement there may be to swear to a lie. There is found in the oath, also, the acknowledgment of the power of God that he is able to punish the one who swears falsely. Then the oath culminates in a confession of the providence of God; that he has set a day when he will judge all men for the deeds done in the body, a great day for which all other days are a preparation, and that on that day he will reward those who keep their oaths and punish those that break them. See what a religious confession is found in the oath: God's existence, his personality, omniscience, holiness, justice, his power and his providence. The idea of an oath is not complete, lacking any one of these elements. A man who takes an oath knowing what he is doing makes a great religious confession, and no man should take an oath in ignorance of its nature.

Another view of an oath regards it as *an act of worship to God*. This is the

view taken of it in the Bible. "And thou shalt swear, The Lord, liveth, in truth, in judgment, and in righteousness." "Thou shalt fear the Lord thy God; and serve him, and shalt swear by his name." It is an honoring of God to invoke him as above us and able to judge us. It is an ascription to God of the glory of his attributes. It is an acknowledgment of our responsibility to him and of our acceptance of him as our judge. Used reverently the oath is an act of homage; used irreverently it is an act of the grossest blasphemy. To take and keep an oath is an honor done to God before angels and men; to take and break it provokes his direst wrath. The climax in the character of a good man is that he keeps his oath even when he has sworn against his own interest, that he has not sworn deceitfully.

The third element in the nature of an oath is that it is a *covenant between man and God*.

An oath from this point of view is a solemn agreement proposed to God by the man who swears. He asks God to witness his truth and fidelity and to re-

ward or punish him according to whether he keeps his agreement or not. This solemn agreement is entered into between man and God for the satisfaction of some third party or parties. In a trial at law it is entered into for the satisfaction of the parties in the case; in the oath of an officer it is for the security and satisfaction of the public who are to be affected by the faithfulness or unfaithfulness of the official.

By this agreement, or covenant, which is entered into by the man who swears, he raises the question of his truthfulness between himself and God, asks God to take account of it and virtually proposes that God will help him keep his oath or condemn him in the day of judgment if he breaks his pledge. It is a tremendous issue to raise between himself and God. There are many men who will not tell the truth in ordinary conversation, who will fear God and his judgment enough to tell the truth under oath. It is said to be common in law suits that a man who does not intend to tell the truth will choose to affirm rather than swear. He feels that when he invokes the judg-

ment of God, he puts eternity at stake and that deliberate falsehood puts away his hope of heaven.

We can see just here why an oath to do a wrong thing is not binding. God is one of the parties to an oath and God will not be a party to an evil agreement and will not punish a man when he breaks such an oath. God cannot be a partner in sin and as an oath requires both man and God to enter into it, there can be no true oath when it is an oath to do evil. It takes two to make a bargain and in such a case God will not be one of them. The sin in such a case is in taking, or in attempting, such an oath, not in breaking it. Such an oath is blasphemous, not binding.

THE USE OF THE OATH.

The use of the oath is in general twofold. It is taken by witnesses to make certain that they will tell the truth with regard to what has taken place in the past, and by officers to insure their fidelity to the law in what they are going to do in the future. Both of these objects are of the utmost importance. On truth

in witness bearing is staked all the interests of justice. To this end is devoted one of the ten great commands of God. In fact two of the ten, the Third and the Ninth Commandments, bear directly on this subject and serve to show the use and importance of the oath. When witnesses tell the truth the course of justice is comparatively plain and easy, but when witnesses swear falsely, then it is very difficult for judge or jury, even with the best intentions, to do justice.

The faithful execution of the laws of the land depend on whether the men in office keep their official oath. If they do, the laws will be faithfully administered, whatever people may think about them, for if the oath be right, the official must keep it on pain of eternal loss. The theory of government is that every man entrusted with official power will keep strictly his oath of office and carry out the law in letter and spirit. His oath binds him to this and he has no right to compromise himself on any account, or fail to do what he is sworn to do. This is the security which the people take of

derful reform in this country if the officers of the law would but make an honest effort to keep the oath of office. Where there is not sufficient public sentiment in a community to enforce the execution of a law, men, as a rule, utterly disregard their oath of office and the law remains a dead letter.

We might in this connection mention open profanity. We can understand better why witnesses and officials do not hold their oaths sacred when we reflect that quite a proportion of the men in most communities take God's name in vain. If a man uses the name of God for his by-word, as an embellishment of his conversation, or to give emphasis to his anger, we can see how the same man would not think much of his oath. Profanity is one of the greatest and one of the most needless of sins. No one could be guilty of it who had not already said in his heart, "There is no God." One could not have any well founded hope that a profane man would make a truthful witness, or a faithful official.

THE REMEDY FOR THE MISUSE OF THE OATH.

The first remedy we suggest is that ministers 'preach on the subject. Although there are so many texts in the Bible in which the oath and the act of swearing are mentioned, very few ministers have ever given the subject a place in their pulpit ministrations. This fact also suggests the other fact that there is but little literature on the subject. With the exception of one small book, Junkin on the Oath, there is no separate publication on the subject found in our common libraries. The man who prepares a discourse on this subject will need to do it mostly out of his own thinking, but so little has been said on the subject that he will have comparatively an untouched field.

Then we think that parents should teach their children the sanctity of an oath. They should carefully guard their children against profanity and teach them that an oath is not to be taken except when lawfully administered, and when taken is to be kept.

The public schools where the state undertakes to educate children so that they

shall become good citizens should give suitable instruction on the sanctity of the oath. The state often requires its citizens to take an oath and all government is suspended on its sanctity; it should, therefore, give the teaching that would enable its citizens to fulfil its own requirements. To this end the Bible, which is the best book of morals, should be in the public schools not only to be read a few minutes at the opening of the day, but as a reading book that the children may become familiar with its teachings.

Men who can write well should use the public press to enforce the sacredness of the oath. No paper will support profanity or perjury for they are defenceless, while most journals will freely admit articles pleading for reverence and truth.

Then the law against blasphemy should be enforced as a preventive to perjury. The usual fine is one dollar for a profane oath. We suggest that no money fine should be exacted for such a sin. It belittles the sin and in some measure brings contempt on the prosecutor. The punishment should be of the nature of a remedy and should consist of a day's solitary imprisonment. That would give time for thought and thought is a cure for blasphemy and irreverence.