

## Oaths and the *imago Dei*

Douglas Vickers

*The Savoy Declaration of Faith* places before us two determinative statements relating to lawful oaths. It is stated, first, that “The name of God only is that by which men ought to swear”; and second, that “to swear vainly, or rashly, by that glorious or dreadful Name . . . is sinful, and to be abhorred.”<sup>1</sup> In the light of those statements, three questions arise: First, what is to be understood as “the name of God” that is advanced as the only legitimate ground of oath-swearing; second, who, among men, can legitimately establish prerogative in swearing lawful oaths and submitting to the implications of them; and third, in the light of answers to those questions what is to be understood as the mandate against “vain” and “rash” swearing? As my title indicates, I shall endeavor to show in the argument that follows that the import of those questions is heightened by the recognition of man as *imago Dei*, the image of God; and that the direction in which answers to the questions follow turns on that recognition.

To begin, I take first the question of the *imago Dei*. Man, in short, is to be recognized as the derivative analogue of God. Responsible personhood resides in man because, as Van Til put it, absolute personhood resides in God. When it is said that man is the derivative analogue of God it is meant that man stands in an analogical relation to God on the levels of both his being and his knowledge. That is to say, man is *like* God his Creator, but is not *identical with* God. As to his *being*, man is characterized by finite resemblances of the infinite characteristics of God who created him. Man as he came from the hands of his Creator is like God in every respect in which a finite and initially holy entity can reflect in his personhood the infinite excellencies of God. Then further, man is the derivative analogue of God as to his *knowledge* and epistemic capacities in that his knowledge is analogical of the knowledge that God possesses in himself. That is

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<sup>1</sup> Robert E. Davis, ed., *The Savoy Declaration of Faith* (Millers Falls: First Congregational Church, 1998, first edition 1658), 61, chapter 23. The same statements are contained in *The Westminster Confession of Faith* (1647) chapter 22, and in the *Second London Baptist Confession* (1689) chapter 23, with the following exception. In each of those confessional statements the word “or” between “glorious” and “dreadful” is changed to “and.”

to say, man is able to possess *true* knowledge of what God knows and has revealed, but he is not able to possess *comprehensive* knowledge. (Note – *a brief but relevant digression*: The distinction that has just been drawn propels our thought to an important question that deserves the closest attention on the level of theological prolegomena, the detailed discussion of which is beyond our present intention. That is the distinction between *archetypal* theology and *ectypal* theology. The former refers to God’s knowledge of himself and his works, and the latter refers to creaturely knowledge of God and his works. That distinction and its importance in early post-Reformation theology appears to have been first expressed prominently in the work of Franciscus Junius in 1594.<sup>2</sup> Its continued importance is reflected in Berkhof’s *Systematic Theology*: “Alongside the archetypal knowledge of Him [God], found in God Himself, there is an ectypal knowledge of Him, given to man by revelation.”<sup>3</sup> *End of digression*). God alone, in his eternal infinity, knows all of the relations between all objects of knowledge. Man, the image of God, can know or comprehend in his finitude only parts and aspects of those relations. Further, God knows all things because he thought all things in one eternal moment before the foundation of the world. God spoke into existence all reality external to the Godhead and all the laws of operation of that reality, including the laws of thought. It follows that it is not possible for man to *do* anything that God has not already thought, and that he is not able to *think* anything that God has not already thought.

Human personhood, then, discloses no higher connotation than that described by the fact that God created man in his own image. Man is a covenant creature. Endowed with faculties of soul that are derivative of divine being and essence, our first parent, as he came to self-conscious awareness, realized that he mirrored in finite degree the character of his divine Creator. When God said “Let us make man in our image” (Gen 1:26), the “us” in the speech of God was not an address to “his angelic court,” notwithstanding some current theological opinion to that effect.<sup>4</sup> Nor is the “us” simply a

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<sup>2</sup> Francisco Junius, *De theologia vera*, 1594. See the historical study on this point by Willem J. van Asselt, “The Fundamental meaning of theology: Archetypal and ectypal theology in seventeenth-century Reformed thought,” *Westminster Theological Journal*, 64 (2002) 319–35. The reference to ectypal theology by Berkhof in the following footnote is to only one of what Junius sees as three kinds of ectypal theology. See van Asselt, *op. cit.*, 330.

<sup>3</sup> L. Berkhof, *Systematic Theology* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1939), 35.

<sup>4</sup> Bruce Waltke, *Old Testament Theology: an exegetical, canonical, and thematic approach* (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 2007), 127.

use of the royal plural. Already at the beginning of the record of God's revelation we have, along with the "Spirit" in Genesis 1:2, an intimation of the trinity of the Godhead and the relations within it. Those relations require us to acknowledge the perichoresis of the Godhead (the indwelling of the Persons of the Godhead in one another) and further issues that cannot detain us at this time. The *opera ad intra*, the works of God internal to the Godhead, bear on the eternal generation of God the Son, the spiration of God the Holy Spirit, and the divine council and formation of the redemptive decrees.

God's personhood is necessary and independent. By the first characteristic it is meant that God is uncaused (not that he himself is the cause of his own existence); and by the second characteristic it is meant that there does not exist external to the Godhead any entity, law, or possibility that constrained God in his choice of action or the determination of his will. God created possibility, and all that eventuates in contingent human action occurs by reason of God's eternal decree. All that God said and did was determined only by his unconstrained will as that was consistent with his love, and it was righteous in that it was consistent with God's own essential holiness.

It follows from what has been said that in the status in which he was established, in soulful faculties of intellect, emotion, and will, Adam thought and spoke because God thinks and speaks; with a naturalness he knew God and knew that he had come from the hands of God; Adam loved God with a naturalness because God loves and is love; man is a moral entity because God is moral; and with a naturalness Adam obeyed God. A point of clarification sums up what has been said. It is firmly stated at 2 Corinthians 4:4 that "Christ . . . is the image of God." Given the implications of that statement, and adverting to our principal concern at this point, how then can it be said that *man* is the image of God? The response is that Christ, as the Scriptures copiously declare, is the *infinite and essential* (as well as incarnational) image of God (meaning that the full essence of the Godhead resides fully in each of the distinguishable Persons of the Godhead), and man is the *finite and derivative* image of God (meaning that while, on the basis of analogy, man is *like* God, he is not *identical with* God). A fully developed Christology requires it to be seen that the first Adam stands as a type of the second. Adam and Christ stand in a typological relation that discloses the substance and fulfilment of God's creation-redemption-eschatological design and purpose.

I do not intend in what follows to argue more expansively the implications of the propositions I have just made. But they are necessary, I shall endeavor to show, in order to examine more fully the meaning of oath-taking, illumined as that is by the fact that man is the image of God. I have stated on a previous occasion, that

“Man, created soul and body, male and female, is the *image of God* in that he is an *immortal, rational, spiritual, moral, and speaking* person, capable of *reflective self-awareness* and *purposive action*, characterized in his created condition by *knowledge* and by *constitutive righteousness*, and endowed with the capacity for the reception of divine revelation, social relations and communication, and communion with God his Creator.”<sup>5</sup>

The fact that the image of God in man was marred by Adam’s fall, in that he lost his initially endowed knowledge, righteousness, and holiness, is spelled out liberally in the pages of Scripture. But while that is so, it remains true that man is still the image of God in that he is still an immortal, rational, spiritual, moral, and speaking person (Gen 9:6; Jas 3:9). At this time, it can be said that man as the image of God sustains two essential relations to God. First, he is the beneficiary of the blessings of God’s common grace. But as history continues, common grace will diminish, and at the crack of doom, at the final day, it will have come to end. Second, by reason of the obligations laid upon him by the primeval covenant of works, sometimes referred to as the covenant of creation, man remains subject to those obligations and will in due time be judged on the grounds of his obedience to them. For the love of God is coordinate with the wrath of God, and divine justice responds to human accountability. God loves all men as creatures, but he hates the sinner as a sinner. “God is angry with the wicked every day” (Ps 7:11), or as another translation has it, God “feels indignation every day.”

### **The plan of argument**

The statement of the Savoy Declaration that “The name of God only is that by which men ought to swear,”<sup>6</sup> brings together the matter of oath-swearing by both God, on the one

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<sup>5</sup> Douglas Vickers, *Christian Confession and the Crackling thorn: The Imperatives of Faith in an Age of Unbelief* (Grand Rapids: Reformation Heritage Books, 2004), 40–41. See *The Savoy Declaration of Faith*, IV:2.

<sup>6</sup> The Savoy Declaration, XXIII:2.

hand, and man as the derivative analogue of God on the other. The argument that follows will accordingly address, in briefer terms than are warranted, what I shall suggest are three loosely related issues: First, if, as has been said, man is the derivative analogue of God, to what extent and in what ways is man's integrity in oath-swearing related to the oath that God himself has sworn? Second, what, essentially, is involved in the oath that God swore? And third, to what extent is man's competence in oath-swearing dependent on the regenerate status or otherwise of the individual swearing the oath? Those questions follow immediately from what has been seen as the relations that exist between man's *being* as the image of God, his resulting *knowledge* and knowing capacities, and his implied *ethical* obligations.

In order to set the stage for further examination of the relations we have just adduced, it is necessary to clarify briefly an aspect of the relations between man's *being*, his *knowledge*, and his *ethical* responsibilities and actions. For as will emerge, it is on the level of ethics that the rightness or otherwise of oath-swearing is to be evaluated. For as to man in his existential status and faculties of intellect, emotion, and will, being (ontology) is prior to knowledge (epistemology), and being and epistemology are prior to right behavior and practice (ethics). If, then, man is *like* God as to his being in analogical and finite relation, and if he knows analogically what God knows and has said, man is to be like God in his actions as well as being. By that it is meant that because all of God's deliberations, actions, and ordinances are righteous, so the actions of man, his image, are to be righteous. That, it will become clear, points to the fact that as God's oath-swearing was righteous, so man's oath-swearing is properly to be righteous. We consider, then, the righteous oath that God swore in the establishment of his covenant with our father Abraham.

A further preliminary point might be noted. It has been said that the analogical relation between man and God requires that as God's actions are righteous, so, also, should be the actions of man who is his image. But that calls in question the meaning of "righteous," particularly as that is relevant to our present context. God, it is clearly revealed, is holy, and God is righteous. But holiness and righteousness, while in important respects they are coterminous, are not synonymous. Holiness, in its essential meaning, refers to the *state* in which an entity exists. It has to do with the character or

quality of being. Righteousness, on the other hand, refers to action or conduct or behavior that is consistent with that preceding state. The detailed implications of that important difference do not need to be worked out at present. But essentially, it is meant that righteous action is itself completely distanced and differentiated from all that partakes, or could potentially partake, of anything that is unworthy of the sanctity of the state of holiness that characterizes the person taking the action, or that potentially violates that state.

It will anticipate what follows to observe that in the matter of oath-swearing, the implications of the oath must in every respect be consistent with the state of rectitude claimed by the one who has sworn. Complete integrity, then, demands not only that honesty of intention is of the essence of the oath sworn, but honesty of fulfillment of the implied terms of the oath should follow as might become necessary. In short, that necessary relation and implication means that when an oath is sworn, the one who swears is thereby undertaking that he swears to his own potential hurt, or, as will become clear, to his self-malediction.

### **The oath of God**

The author of the letter to the Hebrews<sup>7</sup> refers to God's covenant with Abraham and states that "When God made promise to Abraham, because he could swear by no greater, he swore by himself. . . . Wherein God, willing to show unto the heirs of promise the immutability of his counsel, *confirmed it by an oath*" (Heb 6:13, 17, italics added). It should be noted that the statement at that point in the letter to the Hebrews is taken from Genesis 22:16, at which point God, in confirming his covenant with Abraham after Abraham has expressed his willingness to offer up his son Isaac in sacrifice, states that "By myself I have sworn."

God's initiative is similarly observed in the record at Genesis 15:9–17, when God, in a unique manner, gave confirmatory evidence to Abraham of his, God's, unswerving faithfulness to the terms of his covenantal promise. The facts related to God's swearing

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<sup>7</sup> I leave aside the question of the authorship of the letter to the Hebrews. I would not raise any objection if authorship were attributed to the apostle Paul. An extended discussion of the authorship is included in Philip Edgcumbe Hughes, *A Commentary on the Epistle to the Hebrews* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1977), 19–30.

his oath of faithfulness to Abraham are well-known. As it is recorded, God instructed Abraham to take certain animals and, having divided them into parts in a manner instructed, to lay the parts side by side. Then follows a remarkable theophany. God, as a “burning lamp passed between the pieces” (Gen 15:17). God was there acting in a manner that was common to oath-confirmation at that time, swearing an oath of faithfulness to Abraham and to the covenant that he had established with him. In the action that occurred we note the divine unilateral proceedings. It was God who passed between the animal parts in the tradition of oath-swearing, not Abraham. Abraham was the one who was the beneficiary of the covenant. God was there swearing an oath of faithfulness, saying in effect that if he were not faithful to his covenantal promises then let him not be God. Involved in that was God’s oath of self-malediction. It was not, at that specific point, that Abraham was called upon to be faithful; it was God’s declaring his own faithfulness.

The ground of assurance of covenantal fidelity at that point was the fact that God swore the oath by his own name. “He swore by himself” (Heb 6:13). That, to recall previous argument, was God’s righteous action consistent with his own character of holiness. When it is said that there we see God’s oath of self-malediction, God is swearing to his own eternal consistency and constancy. At that point, then, a highly relevant correspondence between the divine and human oath-swearing comes into view. God swore by his name. And the statement of the Savoy Declaration that we have under review states that “the name of God” is the sole ground by which men should swear, in instances where oath-swearing is both called for in human affairs and is legitimate. The relationship underlines the fact that God swore by his name and that consequently, and in view of man’s analogical relation to God, his competence in oath-swearing again rests on his swearing by the name of God. The conjunction that is thereby at issue can be observed more fully in the following respects. To observe the connection, it is necessary to recall our starting point, the fact that man has been established as the image of God.

Now the fact that man is the image of God and that he is therefore the derivative analogue of God, and that as to his being he is *like* God though he is not *identical with* God, carries with it certain imperative obligations. Ontology, the question of being, as we have looked at it in the case of the God-man relation and its analogy of being, is prior to,

and it gives birth to, and it fills out the meaning of, epistemology or the question of knowing, and ethics. That means more specifically that the priority of being over knowledge rests on the further fact that it is only because God has established the world and all its laws of operation that knowledge of anything is possible. It is the being and reality of God and his decreed ordering of all things that makes it possible to predicate meaning to any aspect of reality or any development within it. It is possible to know anything truly only if one knows God truly. In that ultimate sense, and on the part of man, regeneration, as we shall examine it, is prior to knowing.

That last statement will be seen to be integral with the competence of human oath-swearing, and it projects its implications to the issue that is now before us. For it follows that man is to swear, whenever the occasion of legitimate oath-swearing arises, *by the same name as that by which God himself swore*. That is true precisely because man, who is *imago Dei*, the image of God, is to be like God. That necessary likeness again, in analogical status, decision, and action, establishes what is required for verisimilitude in oath-taking.

We have said that ontology, the question of being, is prior to epistemology, the question of knowing, and that one knows anything truly only as he knows God truly. Being, knowing, and ethics stand in the order we have indicated. That, to recall, brings into focus the ethical imperatives of human decision and action. In short, because, as has been argued, man is like God in his analogical status, so he is to be like God in his conduct or, that is, on the level of ethical behavior. As God is righteous in swearing, so man is to be righteous in swearing. That is the issue in its shortest terms. Oath-swearing that is not only legitimate in itself as to its occasion, but is honestly conducted, partakes of the level of righteousness that reflects the righteousness of God.

That is saying in effect that the swearing of an oath involves at the human level the analogue of the self-malediction that God himself spoke in his oath of covenantal faithfulness. Oaths involve promises, at a minimum level the promise to be truthful. It involves, then, the implied understanding that in the same manner as God placed his own identity and veracity at issue in swearing his oath, so an individual who swears an oath is thereby placing himself at a level of obligation corresponding, on an analogical level, to the obligation that God himself assumed. The oath at the human level acquires its most



significant meaning when it is seen as the oath sworn by the image of God, the *imago Dei*.

### **Is regeneration relevant?**

What has now been said points to the third of the issues I raised at the beginning. In answering the questions involved at that point, we turn to further comment on the criteria of rightness in knowledge and behavior. We have confronted the question of man's integrity in oath-swearing and the criteria of decision and action that are involved in it. We summarized much of what is to be said in that regard by tracing briefly the relations between, as we put it, being, knowledge, and behavior. Given that the question of being, or of human status, has been resolved in the manner we have indicated, the question follows: What are the correct or true criteria of truth and validity in knowledge? Before our first parent's fall which, as Milton described it, "brought death into the world and all our woe,"<sup>8</sup> God had placed Adam in possession of the correct and the truly productive criteria on the level of knowledge. He had commissioned Adam to the offices of prophet, priest, and king, and in his prophetic office it was Adam's task to investigate and understand the reality-environment into which he had been created. In his office as priest and within, therefore, the high privilege of direct access to the presence of God, it was Adam's task to dedicate back to God the knowledge and understanding he had thus acquired. But it is one of the many ways of relating the effects and implications of the fall to say that at the fall man lost those true criteria of truth and understanding. Henceforth man in his fallen condition would derive his criteria of truth and validity from within himself, or from within his surrounding social and cultural milieu. That, in short, is a principal result of the fall. Man henceforth set out to live on the assumption of his autonomy from God, and that false assumption of autonomy has determined his conception of what we have so far seen as his being and his knowledge.

But beyond that is the question of the proper criteria of truth in ethics and behavior. In a way similar to what we have already encountered, man in his fallen condition has rejected the God-given criteria of right behavior and has established his criteria of conduct from within his own imagination or from, again, the determinants of

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<sup>8</sup> John Milton, *Paradise lost*, various editions, lines 1–4.

his social and cultural milieu. Such is the sorry and misdirected condition of man in sin. Such are the sorry bequests of the erroneous assumption of human autonomy. But to the contrary, what is now before us requires it to be said that only God and his ethical decrees can establish all such necessary and relevant criteria, not any conceptions born of the assumptions of human autonomy. To project the significance of that conclusion to our present inquiry, the criteria of rightness and adequacy in oath-swearing, it follows, must be what God had required and mandated.

But the implications of that conclusion, applied now to the question of oath-swearing, is the question of the human status and potential for belief and behavior as man stands before the face of God. We observe, therefore, that there are only two classes of people in the world, those who by the regenerating grace of God have been redeemed from the curse of sin and sinful estrangement from God, and those who remain in the darkness of sin and subjection to the god of this world. As the apostle to the Colossians stated it, some have been “delivered from the power of darkness and translated into the kingdom of [God’s] dear Son” (Col 1:13). They were once the dupes and slaves of Satan and sin (“Ye are of your father the devil, and the lusts of your father ye will do” [John 8:44]), and they were securely kept in the somnolence of sin by “the strong man armed” (Luke 11:21). But now they have been called by God’s grace to become “heirs of God, and joint heirs with Christ” (Rom 8:17). “Now are we the sons of God,” John has said (1 John 3:2). For “as many as believed him, to them gave he power to become the sons of God” (John 1:12). The biblical data are copious and well-known.

Such people reflect on the issues of data and criteria that we have encountered and have seen, to their eternal benefit, that “In Christ are hid all the treasures of wisdom and knowledge” (Col 3:2). It was observed that at the fall man lost his possession of the true principles and criteria of understanding and of truth and validity in knowledge and behavior. But now, as a result of the new creation that the regenerating grace of the Spirit of God conveys, “in Christ [the individual] is a new creature; old things are passed away; all things are become new” (2 Cor 5:17). Regeneration recovers for man the true principles of knowledge, understanding, truth, and conduct.

For our present purposes, it is important to put what has just been said in the following terms. What, we ask, is man’s *summum bonum*, his highest good, in this world?

We are not asking the question to which the answer would follow that man's *summum bonum* is to see God, as he will be seen in the eternal age of glory. We are asking what is man's highest good in this world. And the answer follows that while it is not now possible to *see* God with the naked eyes of our humanness, it is possible to *know* God. That, we are saying, is man's highest good, to know God. Indeed, in our Lord's high priestly prayer that he prayed in the presence of his disciples on the night on which he was betrayed, he stated to that effect. "This is life eternal," he said, "to *know* thee, the only true God and Jesus Christ whom thou hast sent" (John 17:3, italics added). But who is the man that knows God? The unregenerate person does not know God. He has at times, it is true, a cognition of God, a conviction that the true God exists and, moreover, he knows that he is accountable to God. The apostle's extended argument in the first chapter of his epistle to the Romans is eloquent on the point. In the sense of a mere cognition, every man knows that God is. But he does not *know* God.

We are not saying that every man has continuously and regularly that cognition and awareness of God as God reveals himself. Many people live in the comfortable darkness of practical atheism that assumes that God does not exist. But from time to time, the awakened *sensus deitatis* that resides deep within the soul, and from which there is no voluntary escape, rises and challenges man's consciousness of God. At that point the natural response, as Paul again makes clear in that important pericope in his letter to the Romans, is to suppress that consciousness, to push it down, to do whatever will at the moment blunt the approach of God. To make that statement in different terms, every man has from time to time an awakened consciousness of God, and there is no escape, therefore, from the conclusion that every man knows that God exists. But, it is equally necessary to say, while every man therefore knows *that* God is, he does not necessarily know *who* God is.

It is the knowledge of *who* God is that our Lord referred to in his high priestly prayer. The question therefore rises: Who is it to whom the knowledge of God has been conveyed and in whom that knowledge is determinative of his life, his thought, and his actions? The answer, in short, is that that is the privilege which accrues to the regenerate individual. In the sense that is now before us, the conclusion follows that the regenerate person knows God, and the unregenerate person does not know God. That is the

inevitable conclusion of a true biblical anthropology. (Note – *A brief digression*. It is beyond our present scope to address the important but negative implication for the knowledge of God that has influenced modern theology since the work of Immanuel Kant at the end of the so-called eighteenth-century Enlightenment. In his theology proper, Kant consigned God to his (Kant's) noumenal realm, and insisting that the possibility of knowledge did not extend to things in that realm, argued that knowledge is possible only of what is perceived in the phenomenal realm. He concluded that it was not possible to know whether God did or did not exist).

What, then, is the name of the true God that only the regenerate Christian knows? The name of God, as to the form of address that is warranted to us, is variously stated in the Scriptures. That is well-known. But our interest at this point is in the fact that the *name* of God means, and stands for, and carries with it the infinite perfections that belong to God as God. To know the *name* of God, therefore, is to be conscious, in the analogical respect that we observed at the beginning, of some aspect of those infinite perfections. If we ask what is meant by *the glory of God* to which we are called to conform our entire thought life and conduct (1 Cor 10:31), the answer is that it is the demonstration to all of God's rational creatures, in this world and in heaven, of his infinite perfections. It is the Christian's high privilege to cooperate with God in the demonstration of his infinite perfections. It is in all of those relevant respects that the regenerate Christian knows the name of God.

But what is to be said at the same time of the unregenerate? In the important respect that now engages us, the unregenerate does not know the name of God. That, now, determines our approach to the highly important question of the swearing of oaths that the Savoy Declaration has brought to our attention. In short, *if the unregenerate person does not know the name of God, how, then, can he swear by the name of God?* To suggest that he can would seem to commit a category mistake. Or to put that in another way, what can the unregenerate oath-swearer be imagined to do when he is swearing *by the name of God?* The question would seem to be not unimportant. Should it be concluded that the person who does not know the name of God is in reality thereby "taking the name of God in vain" and is forthrightly guilty of breaking the third commandment of the Decalogue?

There are many respects in which the answer to that question would appear to be in the affirmative. But we may look at the case a little more fully. The question is to be considered in the light of the statement in the Savoy Declaration that “A lawful oath is a part of religious worship,”<sup>9</sup> That is underlined by the statement that follows, that the person swearing the oath is understood to be “swearing in truth, righteousness, and judgment.”<sup>10</sup> What, it can properly be asked, is the meaning and import of the word “righteousness” in that sentence? The history of commentary has not provided a clear and uniform response to the question. The words just cited from the Savoy do not appear in the Westminster Confession, though they are included in the Second London Baptist Confession. Charles Hodge observes in that connection that the *Thirty-Nine articles* of the Church of England include comparable words, stating that the swearing of an oath “is to be done in justice, judgment and truth.”<sup>11</sup> Charles Hodge, however, observes that “There does not seem to be sufficient reason for this restriction.”<sup>12</sup> Hodge’s intention by his argument on the point is not immediately clear, and appearing as it does to miss the claim stated in the Savoy and the Baptist Confession that is our present concern, it is presented here for purposes of further consideration. “The oath being an appeal to God to bear witness to the truth of our declarations, or the sincerity of our promises, there is no reason why this appeal should not be made whenever any important end is to be accomplished by it.”<sup>13</sup>

Prominent in the argument at that point, then, is the intention of the Savoy as to whether the competence of a person swearing an oath “by the name of God” is confined to those who are regenerate by the grace of God. It is, we have concluded, only such persons who *know* the name of God, and are therefore able righteously to invoke and *swear* by the name of God, who can properly do so. Judgment to that effect would appear to be confirmed by the comment by A. A. Hodge that “It is no less evident that it is dishonest for an atheist to go through the form of swearing at all; or for an infidel to swear with his hand upon the Christian Scriptures, thereby professing to invoke a God in

<sup>9</sup> Savoy Declaration, 23:1. See also Charles Hodge, *Systematic Theology* (London: Thomas Nelson, 1873), Vol. 3, 310.

<sup>10</sup> *Idem.*

<sup>11</sup> See W. H. Griffith Thomas, *The Principles of Theology: An Introduction to the Thirty-Nine Articles* (London: Church Book Room, 1951), 483.

<sup>12</sup> Charles Hodge, *op. cit.*, 310.

<sup>13</sup> *Idem.*

whose existence he does not believe.”<sup>14</sup>

The context in which the swearing of an oath is legitimate is illustrated by adequate scriptural data. We are told to swear by the true God, and in doing so to recognize that “A lawful oath consists in calling upon God . . . with an implied imprecation of God’s disfavour if we lie or prove unfaithful to our engagements.”<sup>15</sup> With that in view, we are told that “Unto me shall every knee bow, every tongue shall swear” (Isa 24:23). And “Thou shalt fear Jehovah thy God, and serve him, and swear by his name” (Deut 6:13). While the oath is thus recognized as a religious institution in the Old Testament, it is to be recognized also that Christ himself was placed under oath by the high priest who said “I adjure thee by the living God,” and that he answered accordingly: “Thou hast said.” (Matt 26:63–64). The apostle Paul also invoked the name of God in similar contexts: “God is my witness” (Rom 1:9); and “I call God for a record upon my soul” (2 Cor 1:23).

Recall, further, our conclusion when we suggested a definition of the image of God in man. At that point we concluded not that man *bears* the image of God, but that he *is* the image of God. And it was further concluded that notwithstanding man’s fall into sin, the image persists. Man is still the image of God in the respects we indicated. That persistence of the reality of image is relevant to our question in further respects. They require us to reflect on man’s continuing relation to God and his inescapable obligation to God.

Consider God’s first covenantal statement of requirement and mandate to man. That has been generally referred to in theological terms as the covenant of works. The details of its specification do not need rehearsal at this point. But what has to be said is that at the fall the requirements and obligations that man sustains under the terms of that covenant were not abrogated or moderated. Man remains obligated to God under the covenant of works, and if he goes to eternal perdition at last it will be on the grounds that he has not fulfilled the obligations of that covenant. Indeed, at that very point we see the glory of the Christian gospel. The reason why Christ came into the world, and what he came to do, can be variously stated. But the reality is that he came to do for his people

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<sup>14</sup> A. A. Hodge, *The Confession of Faith: A Handbook of Christian Doctrine Expounding the Westminster Confession* (London: Banner of Truth, 1958), 287.

<sup>15</sup> *Idem.*

what they were obligated to do under the covenant of works but could not do for themselves because they were the captives of Satan and sin.

Now because man remains, in his fallen state, the image of God, and because, as a result, he sustains obligations to God, he is properly committed to the requirements that the Savoy Declaration has described. That means that all men everywhere are responsible to honor God in life and thought. That includes, notably, as the Savoy calls for it in our present context, the swearing of oaths. But in the outcome, it is all too clear that that mandate is not universally honored. Men may swear by the name of God and yet have no conception of the real proprieties of what they purport to be doing. They are then, in their swearing, doing something in ignorance and unbelief. Ignorance is the hallmark of unbelief. The Jews of old who crucified our Lord did so in ignorance. “For had they known it,” the apostle says, “they would not have crucified the Lord of glory” (1 Cor 2:8). So it is with the unregenerate man who swears in the situation we have just envisaged.

But guilt is not alleviated by ignorance. The man who does not *know* the name of God but yet swears by that name may be ignorantly invoking the true God, simply by reason that the consciousness of the true God, the *sensus deitatis*, lies ineradicably deep within the human soul. If such a person should swear in those terms, he is calling upon himself the potential malediction that unfaithfulness to the requirements of the oath, or the non-performance of its terms, calls for. It would seem that there is reason to conclude that, as is possible also certain of man’s sacramental relations to God, the one who swears under those conditions is doing so “unworthily.” The same level of unworthiness occurs in the scriptural data in two readily recognizable instances. Understanding that in its essential meaning a sacrament is a confirmation of promise, the tree of life that stood in the garden before Adam’s fall is to be understood primarily in its sacramental significance. Though not all theologians agree with the point to be made, Turretin, for example, who succeeded Calvin following the Reformation, concludes that “The tree is a sacrament and symbol of the immortality which would have been bestowed upon Adam if he had persevered in his first state.”<sup>16</sup> Turretin is there in agreement with Augustine on

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<sup>16</sup> Francis Turretin, *Institutes of Elenctic Theology* (Phillipsburg, NJ: P&R Publishing, Volume 1, 1992), 581.

the sacramental significance of the tree of life. Observing on Adam's prelapsarian state, Turretin continues that "As often as he tasted its fruit, he was bound to recollect that he had life not from himself, but from God."<sup>17</sup> When, by reason of his fall into sin, Adam was no longer qualified to partake of the tree, he was excluded, by God's disciplinary action, from access to it. Had he endeavored to return to the garden and eat of the tree he would have done so unworthily and would have called down further damnation on himself.

The second, and comparable, instance of unworthy access to a sacrament applies, as is well known, to unworthy partaking of the sacrament of the Lord's Supper. Again, those in the church who show evidence of being unworthy to participate in the Supper are, by reason of church discipline, excluded from it. Though we are not at this point making any claim for similar sacramental significance of the swearing of an oath, we raise the point of similar unworthiness in engagement in the exercise under review. Oath-swearing "by the name of God" by those who do not *know* the name of God partakes, it is being said, of doing so unworthily and should be shielded from the error itself and the consequences it potentially entails. Such an unworthy action may be taken, as has been said, in ignorance. But again, ignorance does not alleviate guilt.

Comment [DV1]:

### Conclusion

We have seen that the prime responsibility laid on man is that in every respect he should reflect, in his life and thought, the being, the righteousness, and the perfections of God who has given us his name. Comprehended in that is the fact that the name of God is, for his people, first, the shelter in which they can rest securely in every difficulty and vicissitude; and secondly, it is the basis of rightness in all human action and belief. It is the regenerate person who, by the grace of the Spirit of God conveyed in regeneration, can approximate to the high conditions that are involved. For the unregenerate person, that is not so. That is because the unregenerate individual, whether he does so with deliberateness or as a result of blinded ignorance, is living a lie. He not only sees all things "through a glass, darkly" (1 Cor 13:12), but he has, by his involvement in Adam's sin, blinded his eyes so that he willfully cannot see.

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<sup>17</sup> Idem.



We have looked at these and related issues from the perspective of the requirements of oath-swearing. Our conclusion on that level is that serious questions remain as to whether the unregenerate person who does not *know* the name of God in its true connotations is in fact performing an act of treacherous perfidy in claiming to *swear* by that name.

May God by his grace preserve us, his people, from the errors and traps of epistemological and ethical misconduct, so that we may, in the stumbling way that is all-too-frequent in life, yet learn to live to his glory.