

# What Are Oaths and Vows?

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**R. C. SPROUL**

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## Chapter One

# Yes or No

**T**he Westminster Confession of Faith is one of the most comprehensive doctrinal statements ever written. Since its composition in the seventeenth century, it has had a remarkable impact on the world of Protestantism. It provides a thorough summary of the teaching of Scripture, arranged topically. But among the subjects it treats is one that may sound a bit strange to modern ears.

Chapter 22 of the Westminster Confession is titled “Of Lawful Oaths and Vows.” From the vantage point of



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the twenty-first century, we may wonder why theologians would devote space in a creedal statement to lay out principles of lawful oaths and vows. It's one thing to confess our doctrinal affirmations about the resurrection, about the atonement, about justification and sanctification, but why a whole section on oaths and vows?

During the Protestant Reformation, oaths and vows became a matter of great controversy. One of the problems that emerged was that many of the leaders of the Reformation—including Martin Luther and John Calvin—had been ordained to the Roman Catholic priesthood and later left the church. They had taken vows upon entering the priesthood, but they then left the arena in which they had been working out their vows. Were they therefore breaking those vows? Were these vows even appropriate? How should Protestant churches approach vows? These were the kinds of questions that were being asked.

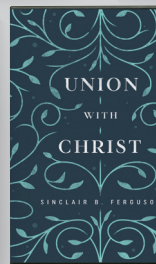
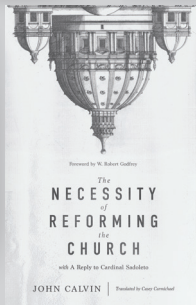
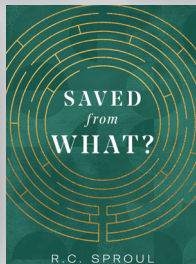
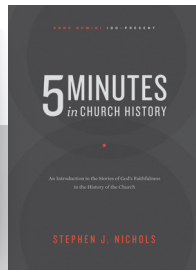
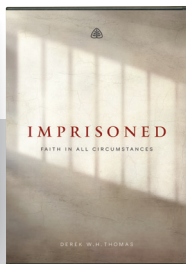
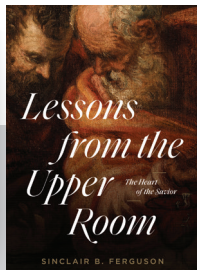
One group of Protestants, the Anabaptists, reacted so strongly against the Roman Catholic system that they repudiated many of the things that they associated with Roman Catholicism, including the taking of vows. The Reformed branch of Protestantism took a different approach. By the seventeenth century, Reformed theologians were trying to

define their understanding of vows by articulating what they believed to be lawful oaths and vows over against the Anabaptists on one side and the Roman Catholics on the other side. This matter may seem foreign to us, but it ought to matter to us because of the prominent place that oaths and vows occupy in the New Testament.

We find this question in the book of Micah: “What does the LORD require of you but to do justice, and to love kindness, and to walk humbly with your God?” (Mic. 6:8). The Bible is such a big book; it has so many laws, so many admonitions. Sometimes we ask ourselves whether there is any simple method for Christian living, any way that we can reduce this vast complexity of responsibilities to its essence. What are the core principles that we’re supposed to follow? This is what Micah provides.

The Apostle James, the brother of Jesus, has a similar summary statement in his epistle. He doesn’t say that it’s the single most important thing that we can do as Christians, but he states his admonition very strongly, beginning it with “above all.” He urges: “But above all, my brothers, do not swear, either by heaven or by earth or by any other oath, but let your ‘yes’ be yes and your ‘no’ be no, so that you may not fall under condemnation” (James 5:12).

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