Another Look
At
Swearing Oaths

Introduction

The refusal to swear oaths has always been a distinctive of Mennonite faith and practice. A separate article on this is found in every major Mennonite confession of faith. There are three reasons for this.

- First, Jesus highlights this teaching as supremely important in Matthew 5. It is one of the six examples of the exceeding righteousness necessary to enter the Kingdom of God. Being good ‘biblicists,’ Mennonites have also emphasized this.

- Second, along with the teaching of enemy love, this teaching has shaped the Mennonite relationship to wider society. This was especially the case among the first generation of Anabaptist/Mennonites. For them oath taking was an integral part of fitting into society and being a responsible citizen. Because of their refusal to harm enemies and swear oaths, they were not accepted in society.

- Third, this understanding of oaths illustrates, in a simple way, a central principle of Anabaptist biblical interpretation. For Mennonites the teaching of Jesus and the apostles takes precedence over the teaching of the Old Testament.
The Interpretive Issue

We seem to have two competing sets of information in the New Testament on oaths.

**Matthew and James:** From a Mennonite point of view the issue is clear enough. Whatever the Old Testament might say, Jesus says, “Do not swear at all,” Matthew 5:34. This excludes all kinds of oaths. This is bolstered by James 5:12, “Above all, my brethren, 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.” It is one thing if God or angels continue to swear oaths. Jesus forbids them to his disciples. This is the standard Mennonite position, articulated in the 1632 Dordrecht confession.

**Examples of Oaths:** However, there appear to be a number of ‘good’ examples of swearing oaths in the New Testament. Some are debated as to what is actually going on, but the number of examples is impressive:

1) In Romans 1:9, Paul calls on God as his witness, which is, in part, an oath formula.
2) 2 Corinthians 1:23 - the same.
3) I Thessalonians 2:5 - the same.
4) Philippians 1:8 - the same.
5) In Galatians 1:20 Paul says, “before God, I do not lie,” which is an oath.
6) In Romans 9:1 he says that he is speaking the truth in Christ, not lying, “my conscience confirms it by the Holy Spirit.”
7) In 2 Corinthians 11:31 Paul says, “The God and Father of our Lord Jesus (blessed be he forever) knows that I do not lie.”
8) In I Corinthians 15:31 the particle “by” is a short form of an oath. It is hard to translate this verse. The New Jerusalem Bible renders it, “I swear by the pride that I take in you, in Christ Jesus our Lord, that I face death every day.”

9) In John 9:24, the blind man who was healed by Jesus is placed under oath to testify about who Jesus is. The phrase “give glory to God” is an idiom for being placed under oath. He answers in this context, thus giving an oath. Yet this new disciple is held up as a good example of discipleship by John.

10) In Matthew 26:63-64 Jesus is put under oath before the living God by the high priest. Jesus then answers him. It is disputed if his answer constitutes an actual oath statement. According to Leviticus 5:1, if you are put under oath in a court context, and you know the answer, not to answer would be to sin.


**NOTE:** There is some disagreement as to what Leviticus 5:1 means. Targum Onqelos to Leviticus agrees with this interpretation - “If a person should sin in that he heard the voice of an oath that he testify about something he had either seen or known about, and he does not give information, then he must bear the guilt.”

So, Jesus had to answer under oath.

According to Rabbinic tradition, found in the Mishnah (Shebuoth 4.1f), to answer in this context is to swear an oath.

Thus we see ten apparent examples in the New Testament of swearing oaths that are seen in a good light.

Our study will try to resolve this issue - How do we take Jesus seriously in his prohibition of oaths and also account for these positive examples of swearing oaths? How do we put this all together without explaining away the teaching of Jesus?
What are Oaths?

Oaths are statements of fact or intention that call upon God (or some other power) to curse the swearer if the fact is wrong, or the intention is not carried out. The introduction of a higher power lends credibility to the statements by putting pressure on the swearer to come through, for their own sake.

There are three parts to an oath:
1) **I Swear** . . .
2) **By** . . . some power greater than you - with a curse implied if you don’t come through. Hebrews 6:16 says, “People swear, of course, by something greater than themselves, and an oath given as confirmation puts an end to all dispute.”
3) **To** . . . this refers to the oath statement itself. This is what you are asserting as true or promising to do.

To swear an oath, you don’t have to go through the entire formula: “I swear/ by (to) God/ to help you tomorrow.” You can say simply, “I swear I will help you,” or “by God I will help you.”

Two Kinds of Oaths

There are two basic kinds of oaths - a testimonial oath and a promissory oath.

1) A **testimonial oath** is a statement of fact. You invoke God to testify that something is true or false. In Matthew 26:72 & 74 Peter swears this kind of oath - “I do not know the man (Jesus)!“ - with curses stated as well.

2) A **promissory oath** is a statement of intention. You invoke God to guarantee that something will happen. 

**NOTE:** The Mishna, Shebuoth 1.1; 3.1 lists four kinds of oaths - the positive and negative form of these two.
you will, or will not do a thing. In Matthew 14:7 Herod makes a promissory oath to Herodias. The promise is “to grant her whatever she might ask,” which got John the Baptist killed.

**Overview of the Old Testament on Oaths**

Here is some of the basic teaching on oaths in the Old Testament:
- You are only to swear by the name of Yahweh - Deuteronomy 6:13; 10:20. To swear by another god is to recognize that god and to place oneself under its power.
- You are not to swear falsely - Leviticus 19:12. This takes the name of Yahweh in vain, which is a violation of the third commandment - Exodus 20:7. It will not go unpunished. (In some of the Targums, Exodus 20:7 is specifically talking about oaths.)
- Oath swearing by Yahweh is good. It is intended to promote righteous speech.

**A Resolution**

It is clear in the context of Matthew 5 that Jesus is going beyond what is taught in the Old Testament; he is fulfilling or perfecting it - Matthew 5:17. But in what way does he go beyond the Old Testament? It is the proposal of this study that Jesus is excluding every kind of promissory oath, but not testimonial oaths. We will test this against the relevant passages.
Test #1

This proposal makes sense of the ‘good’ oaths that are found in the New Testament. The ten examples are all testimonial oaths. Jesus and the healed disciple are giving statements of fact in trial contexts. Paul is in every case testifying to the truth of his statements, not making promises.

Test #2:

This also fits with what Jesus says in Matthew 5:33-37.

“Repay” Language in 5:33: Jesus said, “Again, you have heard that it was said to those of ancient times, ‘Do not break your oath (you shall not swear falsely), but repay to the Lord the oaths you make.’” (Despite some translations Jesus is not talking about vows here. See - Appendix on Vows.)

The word “repay” is often translated - “carry out,” “fulfill,” “perform,” or “keep.” The use of this word is the key indicator that Jesus is referring to promissory oaths in this passage, since there is nothing to repay or carry out in the instance of a testimonial oath - you have either told the truth or not. Repay language, which originally comes from

NOTE: The use of repay language is interesting, since vows are different from oaths. However, vows are like promissory oaths in that they both have to do with committing yourself to something in the future (which is why they are dealt with together in Numbers 30). Jesus takes vow language from Psalm 50:14 and applies it to oaths here. The assimilation of vow texts to promissory oath contexts was not restricted to Jesus. In the Pseudo-Jonathan Targum on Deuteronomy 23:24 it says “you shall fulfill an oath that comes from your lips.” The Hebrew Bible, however, has “vow” here. Also in the Dead Sea Scrolls, The Damascus Document 16.6 f. Deuteronomy 23:24 is used of promissory oaths. “As for the passage ‘observe what comes out of your lips’ (Deuteronomy 23:24) it means to abide by every binding oath in which a man promises to do anything from the Law: he may not break it, even at the price of death.”
a vow context - Psalm 50:14, assumes (in common with a vow) that you have committed yourself to do something, or not to do something, so that you must come through on your promise.

The first phrase, “You shall not swear falsely/Do not break your oath,” (from Leviticus 19:12) could refer to either kind of oath, but in connection with the second phrase it should be seen as referring to promissory oaths. This makes the most sense of the sentence as a whole. Hence the translation “do not break your oath,” that is, come through on what you pledge yourself to do by oath - is the preferred rendering over the more ambiguous “you shall not swear falsely.”

So the easiest way to read what Jesus is about to forbid (in v. 34), is that he is referring to promissory oaths.

The Meaning of - “Do not Swear at all.” Jesus’ Rejection of Substitute Oaths: Jesus says in 5:34-36, “Do not swear 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 swear by your head, for you cannot make one hair white or black.” Jesus is here rejecting substitute oaths. By the first century people were reluctant to swear by the name of Yahweh, for it was no longer thought fit even to pronounce the Name out of reverence. This led to much discussion about what substitutes could be used for the Name, and thus which oaths were really binding, and which might not be truly binding. Jesus’
argument here is that all of these substitutes point back to God (Isaiah 66:1; Psalm 48:2), and so they all invoke God, and thus are all binding. This same point is made in more detail in Matthew 23:16-22 - e.g. if you swear by the altar, you swear by the sanctuary; if you swear by the sanctuary, you swear by the one who dwells in it - God.

What does Jesus mean by “at all”? He seems to mean here that all promissory oaths are forbidden - those that directly name God, and those that don’t (substitute oaths), since these imply God, too. “At all” is a reference to explicit God oaths and all substitute oaths, not promissory and testimonial oaths.

The Rationale for Rejecting Oaths: 5:36-37, “for you cannot make one hair white or black. Let your word be ‘Yes,’ ‘Yes,’ or ‘No,’ ‘No,’; anything more than this comes from the evil one (or from evil).”

Why are oaths forbidden by Jesus? Jesus focuses on our inability to do things. This again points us to promissory oaths. There is no indication in Scripture that we are unable to tell the truth when we know it - a testimonial oath. But we are to be humble about what we can perform in the future (see below James 4:13-16). Jesus takes note of human weakness and thus tells us not to swear by any kind of oath of intention regarding the future.

Although it is not stated, looming behind this is, no doubt, Exodus 20:7. Since we cannot always come through on our sworn promises, we should not entangle God’s holy name with our fallibility. This brings the Name to dishonor and brings judgment upon us.

The phrase - “anything more than this comes from the evil one” probably refers to the arrogance of Satan, or just the evil of arrogance, of those who do not see their human limitations regarding the future.
Jesus then tells us to let our word be yes, yes and no, no. This means, let our yes be truly a yes and our no truly a no. That is, simply do or don’t do what you say you will or will not do - without oaths.

**Test #3**

This proposal also fits with James 5:12.

*Do not swear . . . by any other oath.* When James speaks of not swearing by “any other oath” it is again in the context of rejecting substitute oaths. He is saying do not swear “by heaven, or by earth, or by any other (substitute) oath.”

**The Rationale for Not Swearing:** According to James we are not to swear, because we will “fall under condemnation.” Again, there is no indication that we are unable to tell the truth by means of a testimonial oath, but in James we have a clear affirmation of our inability to predict our future doings. James 4:13-16 says, “Come now, you who say, ‘Today or tomorrow we will go to such and such a town and spend a year there, doing business and making money.’ Yet you do not even know what tomorrow will bring. . . . Instead you ought to say, ‘If the Lord wills, we will live and do this or that.’ As it is, you boast in your arrogance; all such boasting is evil.” This matches up remarkably well with what we saw in Matthew 5, although this is not explicitly an oath context. Some form of Matthew 5:36-37 however, may be behind these verses in James.

To swear promissory oaths is arrogant; it is boasting, which is evil (or of the evil one). It assumes we can always carry out our intentions. We should be more humble and recognize our limitations. When we do swear promissory oaths, and we fail to come
through - then we “fall under condemnation.” So, simply say yes or no when you make a promise.

**A Confirmation: Paul in 2 Corinthians 1:16-20**

In this text Paul is responding to being chided by the Corinthians because he said he would visit them, and he did not. In vs. 17-18 he uses the “yes, yes and no, no” language and “your word be” phrase, that come from Jesus and James. This passage is interesting because of this and because a testimonial oath follows in v.23. The point here, however, is that in vs. 17-18 the echo of Jesus’ teaching shows up in a context that has to do with future plans, making promises and keeping promises (v. 20). This could indicate that Paul and the Corinthians were aware of Jesus’ oath teaching and knew that it had to do with promissory oaths (and not testimonial ones - v. 23). Paul did not swear to come see them, but the Corinthians are saying - ‘he said yes, he would come, and he should have come through on it’ - Matthew 5:37.

**Conclusion**

It is best to read Jesus as prohibiting all kinds of promissory oaths - which is indeed a radical heightening of the Old Testament standard. Matthew 5:33-37 makes quite good sense in this reading. Also, Matthew’s highlighting of the fact that Jesus was placed under oath in 26:63-64 (his is the only account that does this) can be seen as a way of further indicating what Jesus meant by his oath teaching in chapter 5 (also only found in Matthew). Matthew is using a narrative to supplement the didactic material in chapter 5, to show that Jesus had promissory oaths in mind.
It is also quite easy to read James 5:12 in this way. Finally, this also makes complete sense out of the ten ‘good’ examples of swearing we find in the New Testament.

**Application**

1. Jesus allows testimonial oaths, when we are sure what the truth is, as we see Paul doing from time to time.
2. In particular this teaching excludes the traditional political oath of office, the military oath, and the court oath. These are all promissory oaths. You promise ahead of time that you will do a given thing.
   But in all of these cases today, as far as I can tell, you can affirm instead of swear, thus making the commitment by saying your yes will be yes and also not involving God in it.
3. In general these verses teach:
   - **Integrity** - we should come through on our promises and commitments (without the use of an oath). Matthew 5:37. Let your reputation for keeping your word be all the credibility you need.
   - **Humility** - we are limited in our ability to carry out our intentions. We do not know the future and cannot guarantee it. To try to do so is boastful, arrogant and evil. Matthew 5:33-36; James 4:13-16.
   - **The reverence of God’s name** - we especially should not involve God’s holy name by means of an oath with our human weakness and fallibility. Matthew 5:33-37, James 5:12.
Mennonites and Swearing Oaths

The Dordrecht Confession of 1632 forbids promissory and testimonial oaths. This confession, which has been called the mother of all Mennonite confessions, has influenced all other confessions on this topic.

The Schleitheim Confession of 1527, by Michael Sattler, however is different. It treats Jesus’ words as referring to promises and it takes note of the apostles’ swearing as being only of a testimonial kind: “The oath is the confirmation among those who are quarreling or making promises.” Why is it forbidden? “We cannot perform what is promised in swearing”

Since God can swear when making promises, someone might ask, “Why then should I not swear if I promise something to someone?” The answer is, “no one can withstand or thwart God’s will; thus he can keep his oath. But we cannot, as Christ said above, hold or perform our oath, therefore we should not swear.”

What about the apostles who swore? “Peter and Paul only testify to that which God promised Abraham, whom we long after have received. But when one testifies, one testifies concerning that which is present, whether it be good or evil.”

Although Sattler is wrong about testimonial oaths – they are, in fact, oaths – his position is correct in focusing on Jesus’ prohibition of promissory oaths.

NOTE: Zwingli’s text of the Schleitheim Confession is more explicit on this point - “Peter and Paul only testify to this, that by God himself a promise was made to Abraham by an oath, but they themselves make no promises, as the examples clearly reveal. For testifying and swearing are entirely distinct. When an oath is taken something is promised for the future.” Refutation of Baptist Tricks.
Appendix - What About Vows?

What are Vows?

1. Vows are voluntary, formal commitments to God - to abstain from something, to sacrifice something, to set something you own apart for God’s use, or to do something like fasting or almsgiving.

2. Vows are made directly to God. It is an agreement between a person and God, and does not normally pertain to other people.

3. Vows can have different motives: They can simply express devotion or religious zeal. Some, however, have a deal quality to them - ‘God if you will help me out, then I will do such and such’ - Genesis 28:20; Judges 11:30, 39.

4. Vows must be kept. You must “repay them to the Lord.” Lack of fulfillment brings God’s judgment.

Vows and Oaths

Vows are different than oaths, because there is no swearing that involves God’s name.

Vows are like promissory oaths, however, because both have to do with future pledges, both involve God, both are voluntary, and both must be carried out. This is why they can be treated together in places like Numbers 30.

Does Jesus Forbid Vows in Matthew 5:33-37?

Some translators insert vows in 5:33, apparently because 5:33b uses vow-like language. But Jesus is not talking about vows here.
1. The words used in 5:33 are derived from the word “oath” not the word “vow.”
2. What is explicitly forbidden in 5:34 is “swearing,” not vowing.
3. The verses that follow only give oath examples, not vows.

**What about Vows in the Rest of the New Testament?**

1. In a context that addresses vows in Matthew 15:5-6, the vow is not condemned in and of itself, only the use of it to get around God’s requirement to care for parents.
2. In Matthew 19:12, when Jesus speaks of eunuchs for the Kingdom, he may have in mind a vow of celibacy.
3. In James 5:12, swearing oaths is forbidden, but in 5:15 he recommends “the vow of faithfulness” (or the prayer of faith).
6. Paul appears to make a vow in I Corinthians 8:13 regarding eating meat.

**Conclusions**

2. The use of vow-like language in Matthew 5:33 does not point to the inclusion of vows in this teaching, but rather the assimilation of vow-language for use to talk about promissory oaths, which are forbidden.