

A Declaration on the Ninth Commandment as it Relates to Slander through the Medium of the Internet

Adopted by the 2008 General Assembly

Commission: The issue concerning the use of the internet and the potential for slander has continued to come before this body and its presbyteries. Therefore the following positional paper has been adopted to give instruction on the use of the internet in dealing with issues that are raised on web-sites by non-members and members of this denomination.

Preface : The modern term “blogging” derives its name from “blog” (short for **web log**) which is a website where entries are written by various individuals in chronological order but displayed in reverse chronological order. Since the invention of the internet and its subsequent development, many households in America today have access to a computer and the means to connect to the internet. *The Wikipedia explains blog or blogging as such: Blogs provide commentary or news on a particular subject such as food, politics, or local news; some function as more personal online diaries. A typical blog combines text, images, and links to other blogs, web pages, and other media related to its topic. The ability for readers to leave comments in an interactive format is an important part of many blogs. Most blogs are primarily textual, although some focus on art (artblog), photographs (photoblog), sketchblog, videos (vlog), music (MP3 blog), or audio.* According to the latest research there are almost 100 million blog sites being used and monitored daily. The emergence of blogging has brought a range of legal and ethical liabilities. One area of concern is the issue of bloggers releasing proprietary or confidential information. Another area of concern is blogging as it relates to the defamation of the good name and character of various individuals.

Doctrine: The Westminster Divines have declared the following concerning the Ninth Commandment in the Larger Catechism: Q143: *Which is the ninth commandment?* A143: The ninth commandment is, Thou shalt not bear false witness against thy neighbor. [1] Exod. 20:16; Q144: *What are the duties required in the ninth commandment?* A144: The duties required in the ninth commandment are, the preserving and promoting of truth between man and man,[1] and the good name of our neighbor, as well as our own;[2] appearing and standing for the truth;[3] and from the heart,[4] sincerely,[5] freely,[6] clearly,[7] and fully,[8] speaking the truth, and only the truth, in matters of judgment and justice,[9] and in all other things whatsoever;[10] a charitable esteem of our neighbors;[11] loving, desiring, and rejoicing in their good name;[12] sorrowing for,[13] and covering of their infirmities;[14] freely acknowledging of their gifts and graces,[15] defending their innocence;[16] a ready receiving of a good report,[17] and unwillingness to admit of an evil report,[18] concerning them; discouraging talebearers,[19] flatterers,[20] and slanderers;[21] love and care of our own good name, and defending it when need requireth;[22] keeping of lawful promises;[23] studying and practicing of whatsoever things are true, honest, lovely, and of good report.[24] (1. Zech. 8:16 2. III John 1:12 3. Prov. 31:8-9 4. Psa. 15:2 5. II Chr. 19:9 6. I Sam. 19:4-5 7. Josh. 7:19 8. II Sam. 14:18-20 9. Lev. 19:15; Prov. 14:5, 25 10. II Cor. 1:17-18; Eph. 4:25 11. Heb. 6:9; I Cor. 13:7 12. Rom. 1:8; II John 1:4; III John 1:3-4 13. II Cor. 2:4; 12:21 14. Prov. 17:9; I Peter 4:8 15. I Cor. 1:4-5, 7; II Tim. 1:4-5 16. I Sam.22:14 17. I Cor. 13:6-7 18. Psa. 15:3 19. Prov. 25:23 20. Prov. 26:24-25 21. Psa. 101:5 22. Prov. 22:1; John 8:49 23. Psa. 15:4 24. Phil. 4:8);

Commentary: The Westminster Confession Of Faith of 1647 {the standard of systematic Biblical doctrine for the Reformed Presbyterian Church General Assembly) has much to say regarding what is commanded and forbidden in the ninth commandment. Considering *The Larger Catechism* (LC) Q 144 and Q 145, we will see that the Divines went into great detail regarding the full teaching of this commandment. Considering LC Q 144: “What are the duties required in the ninth commandment?”, the answer details the Biblical teaching found in each proposition upon Holy Scriptures. A: *The duties required in the ninth commandment are, the preserving and promoting of truth between man and man, and the good name of our neighbor as well as our own; appearing and standing for the truth; and from the heart, sincerely, freely, clearly, and fully, speaking the truth, and only the truth, in matters of judgment and justice, and in all other things whatsoever; a charitable esteem of our neighbors; loving, desiring, and rejoicing in their good name; sorrowing for, and covering of their infirmities; freely acknowledging of their gifts and graces,*

defending their innocency; a ready receiving of a good report, and unwillingness to admit of an evil report, concerning them; discouraging tale-bearers, flatterers, and slanderers; love and care of our own good name, and defending it when need requireth; keeping of lawful promises; studying and practicing of whatsoever things are true, honest, lovely and of good report.” We begin by looking at each section in detail beginning with the first: *“The duties required in the ninth commandment are, the preserving and promoting of truth between man and man, and the good name of our neighbor as well as our own.* This section demonstrates the principle of keeping and promoting truth between men especially as it relates to preserving our own and others’ good name. All conversations, regardless of media, (oral or written) ought to be carried out in a truthful manner, preserving the truth and the good name of all parties. Continuing, the Divines write: *“appearing and standing for the truth; and from the heart, sincerely, freely, clearly, and full, speaking the truth, and only the truth, in matters of judgment and justice and in all other things whatsoever”*; This particular instruction makes clear that the requirement must appear, and stand in behalf of the truth, for truth’s sake, and is immediately followed by the requirement of sincerity—that all our communications must be “from the heart”—that is, free from deceit, hypocrisy, or ulterior motive, in keeping with Psalm 15:2 *“He who walks with integrity, and works righteousness, And speaks truth in his heart. 3 He does not slander with his tongue, Nor does evil to his neighbor, Nor takes up a reproach against his friend”*. Therefore, our words must be sincere, spoken freely, and with clarity (without insinuation, confusion, and devoid of a manner, or intonation that hides or blurs the truth). Observe also that our conversations and/or communications must be truthful in matters concerning judgment and justice. Truth-telling and the giving true testimony is the God-ordained means of arriving at justice in the matter of judgment. Let us remember the Biblical principle that a witness or testimony is only taken as true on the basis of at least two witnesses: meaning, it must be two who can testify with the same clarity as to the actuality of the matter. This principle is not only for “legal or court testimony” but also *“in all other things whatsoever”*. The Divines continue by stating: *“a charitable esteem of our neighbors”*; showing that the Scriptures require the disposition of the mind must be first and foremost “charitable”. They continue this teaching by expanding on this charitable disposition, saying, *“loving, desiring, and rejoicing in their good name;”* We must always put forward a posture of love to our neighbors, to desire a good name for them, and to rejoice in that good name. However, this is not enough because our Catechism then goes on to require of us a: *“sorrowing for, and covering of their infirmities”*; This requirement is difficult, but it is founded upon the lawful principle of love for our neighbor and concern for his good name. Rather than exposing his infirmities through sinful speech to others, or criticizing him and defaming his good name, either publicly or privately, our love must cover his infirmities. While it is our duty to humbly and privately reprove and warn him of his sin and help him to seek repentance, we must use great care when speaking to others to protect their reputation. This is why the Divines used the word “covering”. They make reference to two Scriptures that teach this very clearly. Proverbs 17:9 *“He who covers a transgression seeks love, But he who repeats a matter separates intimate friends.”* and 1 Peter 4:8 *“Above all, keep fervent in your love for one another, because love covers a multitude of sins.”* They continue their answer by stating: *“freely acknowledging of their gifts and graces, defending their innocency”*. It is our duty to acknowledge the gifts given to others by God and the graces that they display in their lives. We are required to defend them when they are falsely accused. Defending those who are innocent is our duty at all times; however, the inference here is greater because even when we know their infirmities and shortcomings we are to remain constant in their defense, and avoid communicating their faults to others! The Divines continue: *“a ready receiving of a good report, and unwillingness to admit of an evil report, concerning them.”* It is much easier to accept a good report concerning our neighbor than an unwillingness to receive an evil report concerning them. Many times, in our weakness, it is easier to receive an evil report of them than a good report, and then compound that sin by repeating the evil to someone else. This is exactly why the Divines say we must be unwilling to receive an evil report. Let’s continue in their teaching: *“discouraging tale-bearers, flatterers, and slanderers;”* It is our duty to discourage any conversation and/or attitude we might see in others, or ourselves, which does not edify the body of Christ as the Spirit of God, through the Apostle Paul required in: Ephesians 4:29 *“Let no unwholesome word proceed from your mouth, but only such a word as is good for edification according to the need of the moment, that it may give grace to those who hear. 30 And do not grieve the Holy Spirit of God, by whom you were sealed for the day of redemption. 31 Let all bitterness and wrath and anger and clamor and slander be put away from you, along with all malice. 32 And be kind to one another, tender-hearted, forgiving each other, just as God in Christ also has forgiven you.”* The Divines continue: *“love and care of our own good name, and defending it when need requireth; keeping of lawful promises;”* The Divines continue: *“love and care of our own good name, and defending it when*

need requireth; keeping of lawful promises;” When wrongfully accused we do have the right to defend ourselves. However, it is not a requirement, especially when a previous covenant has been made between individuals which would keep us from defending ourselves. We are required to keep our covenant promises and not break them, even if it causes us hurt and gives us grief. In conclusion Divines say: *“studying and practicing of whatsoever things are true, honest, lovely, and of good report.”* This is supported by what the Apostle Paul wrote in Philippians 4:8 *“Finally, brethren, whatever is true, whatever is honorable, whatever is right, whatever is pure, whatever is lovely, whatever is of good report, if there is any excellence and if anything worthy of praise, let your mind dwell on these things.”* Our life’s example will demonstrate that what we meditate on will be witnessed by what we practice in our daily lives. Having first addressed the positive statement of the Ninth Commandment’s requirement the Divines continue by asking what is forbidden. LC Q 145: *What are the sins forbidden in the ninth commandment?* A145: The sins forbidden in the ninth commandment are, all prejudicing the truth, and the good name of our neighbors, as well as our own,[1] especially in public judicature;[2] giving false evidence,[3] suborning false witnesses,[4] wittingly appearing and pleading for an evil cause, outfacing and overbearing the truth;[5] passing unjust sentence,[6] calling evil good, and good evil; rewarding the wicked according to the work of the righteous, and the righteous according to the work of the wicked;[7] forgery,[8] concealing the truth, undue silence in a just cause,[9] and holding our peace when iniquity calleth for either a reproof from ourselves,[10] or complaint to others;[11] speaking the truth unseasonably,[12] or maliciously to a wrong end,[13] or perverting it to a wrong meaning,[14] or in doubtful and equivocal expressions, to the prejudice of truth or justice;[15] speaking untruth,[16] lying,[17] slandering,[18] backbiting,[19] detracting,[20] tale bearing,[21] whispering,[22] scoffing,[23] reviling,[24] rash,[25] harsh,[26] and partial censuring;[27] misconstruing intentions, words, and actions;[28] flattering,[29] vainglorious boasting,[30] thinking or speaking too highly or too meanly of ourselves or others;[31] denying the gifts and graces of God;[32] aggravating smaller faults;[33] hiding, excusing, or extenuating of sins, when called to a free confession;[34] unnecessary discovering of infirmities;[35] raising false rumors,[36] receiving and countenancing evil reports,[37] and stopping our ears against just defense;[38] evil suspicion;[39] envying or grieving at the deserved credit of any,[40] endeavoring or desiring to impair it,[41] rejoicing in their disgrace and infamy;[42] scornful contempt,[43] fond admiration;[44] breach of lawful promises;[45] neglecting such things as are of good report,[46] and practicing, or not avoiding ourselves, or not hindering: What we can in others, such things as procure an ill name.[47] (*I. I Sam. 17:28; II Sam. 1:9-10, 15-16; 16:3 2. Lev. 19:15; Hab. 1:4 3. Prov. 6:16, 19; 19:5 4. Acts 6:13 5. Jer. 9:3, 5; Acts 24:2, 5; Psa. 3:1-4; 12:3-4 6. Prov. 17:15; I Kings 21:9-14 7. Isa. 5:23 8. Psa. 119:69; Luke 16:5- 7; 19:8 9. Lev. 5:1; Acts 5:3, 8-9; II Tim. 4:6 10. I Kings 1:6; Lev. 19:17 11. Isa. 59:4 12. Prov. 29:11 13. I Sam. 22:9-10; Psa. 52:1 14. Psa. 56:5; John 2:19; Matt. 26:60-61 15. Gen. 3:5, 26:7, 9 16. Isa. 59:13 17. Lev. 19:11; Col. 3:9 18. Psa. 1:20 19. Psa. 15:3 20. James 4:11; Jer. 38:4 21. Lev. 19:16 22. Rom. 1:29-30 23. Gen. 21:9; Gal. 4:29 24. I Cor. 6:10 25. Matt. 7:1 26. Acts 28:4 27. Gen. 38:24; Rom. 2:1 28. Neh. 6:6-8; Rom. 3:8; Psa. 69:10; I Sam. 1:13-15; II Sam. 10:3 29. Psa. 12:2-3 30. II Tim. 3: 31. Luke 18:9, 11; Rom. 12:16; I Cor. 4:6; Acts 12:22; Exod. 4:10-14 32. Job 4:6, 27:5-6 33. Matt. 7:3-5 34. Prov. 28:13; 30:20; Gen. 3:12-13; 4:9; Jer. 2:35; II Kings 5:25 35. Gen. 9:22; Prov. 25:9-10 36. Exod. 23:1 37. Prov. 29:12 38. Acts 7:56-57; Job 31:13-14 39. I Cor. 13:5; I Tim. 6:4 40. Num. 11:29; Matt. 21:15 41. Ezra 4:12-13 42. Jer. 48:27 43. Psa. 35:15-16, 21; Matt. 27:28-29 44. Jude 1:16; Acts 12:22 45. Rom. 1:31; II Tim. 3:3 46. I Sam. 2:24 47. II Sam. 13:12-13; Prov. 5:8-9; 6:33).*

Here, as with the other parts of the Decalogue, the procedure of the Divines was to begin with what is required in the Commandments, and to finish with what is forbidden. This wise, comprehensive and logical method of instruction has proven profitable to all who have sought to understand their daily practical duty under the Law of God. We will not cover all that the Divines taught concerning what was forbidden in the Ninth Commandment, but will comment only on those which deal specifically with the subject at hand. We begin with the basic principle that we ought to protect our neighbor’s good name. In applying this principle, we must not prejudice the minds of our brethren against others in such a way that would lead to the defamation of our neighbor’s good name. Consequently, we must not disclose anything to others who have no reasonable interest in a matter of sin, or of supposed sin, thus clouding objectivity and leading to the surmising of evil. Further, a Christian must never have a haughty or high minded attitude when others’ names are being defamed, and ought never to derive secret satisfaction from an evil report concerning his neighbor. It should also be noted that Christians are forbidden to conceal the truth, to keep silent, or to withhold Biblical correction, according to place and station, if they witness their neighbor’s good name

being unjustly defamed. We are also forbidden to make complaints to others who are not a party to the issue. Christians are not permitted to speak the truth inappropriately, or to speak the truth maliciously to a wrong end, perverting the matter to a wrong meaning. We are also forbidden to speak or write in a way that brings in doubtful and equivocal expressions which prejudices the truth and justice or would cause others to be swayed to such a prejudicial view. This type of speech would include sinful hyperbole and ridicule. The Divines also pointed out that we are forbidden to speak untruthfully, because this is tantamount to lying, slandering, backbiting, detracting, tale bearing, whispering, scoffing, reviling, rash, or harsh. The Scriptures define as sinful any unjust censuring or condemning of an individual wherein he might be deprived of his good name and reputation, unless the accused is permitted proper means and due process to ensure a right and proper defense. Also we are to be careful not to misrepresent our intentions, words, and actions to the detriment of our neighbor by the use of flattering, vainglorious boasting, consequently then, thinking or speaking too highly or too shamefully of ourselves or others. We must also be careful that we do not become involved in exaggerating smaller faults, and then hiding, excusing, or justifying such sins. When appealing for a confession, we are not to reveal further infirmities as a means for inflicting additional injury on our neighbor. We are not to be engaged in raising false rumors, receiving and approving sinful reports, or refusing to listen to a just defense in the proper venue as ascribed by God's Word. Christians must avoid raising suspicions about their neighbor. They must not be found rejoicing in the disgrace and ill repute that has been brought to bear on those who have been the object of said sins by those seeking to injure their good name and reputation. Therefore, a Christian is always required to follow the proper God-ordained method of dealing with such issues, and those in authority are duty bound to insure that all procedure be conducted according to the Scriptures. To allow such a sin to continue would be a sin for us. God has set up appropriate means within the church or civil government where these matters should be handled with proper procedures that are not open for sinful, public interactions, where the use of false and/or misleading language could lead to a perverting of the truth or use words that promote misunderstanding, thus leaving people with the impression that there has been sin committed when there is no true evidence of such.

Whereas, those who promote false or unsubstantiated reports concerning their neighbors, spread such reports which are uncertain, only partially true, are guilty of violating the Ninth Commandment and are called talebearers, backbiters, and slanderers who have by such design, determined to injure the good name of their neighbors. Often they begin their malicious reports by prefacing their statements with the pretence of a great respect to the person whom they are about to speak against, and acting surprised at the information they are about to divulge then offering a pretence that they are sorry for what they are about to relate. This is most usually accompanied by the stated hope that this person will come to repentance, while, on the other hand, they make it their business to spread the gossip among those who are willing to imbibe in their sinful behavior. However, they will soon find themselves without a good reputation as they are endeavoring to ruin the reputation of another. Often they do this by aggravating an individual's faults or representing them as worse than they really are. Such persons propagate slander by reporting the bad actions of an individual and at the same time overlooking their good actions, rather than setting the balance over-against the other. They often overlook their own past sins and they come with the pretence of a self-righteous individual. Some will even confess to their own past or present sins, excusing their actions with little or no condemnation on themselves while convicting others for their perceived wrongs. Some times they will become defensive when their own faults or sins are pointed out and will lash-out at those who have only pointed out what is obvious to all. However, it is not only those who propagate slander in this manner who are guilty of violating the Ninth Commandment, but those who are willing to listen and to further propagate the lies being told. According to the Ninth Commandment we also sin when we listen to malicious reports rather than rebuking and reproofing those who publicly or privately make a practice of giving malicious reports out of a sinful desire to do damage to the good name of their neighbor. Further, slandering a man's good name, even if some of the things reported are true is not the Biblical method of reclaiming such erring individuals. Such public actions are contrary to the Scriptures and therefore never profitable. We must not add sin to sin, nor do evil that (supposed) good may come. By endeavoring to remove the good name of our neighbor and thus, endanger the loss of our own reputation, we must not delude ourselves into thinking that we can bring glory to Christ's kingdom by such violations of His Law. In Leviticus 19:16-17 there is a prohibition to slander and gossip, wherein the law demands that: *"You shall not go about as a slanderer among your people, and you are not to act against the life of your neighbor; I am the LORD. 17 'You shall not hate your fellow countryman in your heart; you may surely reprove your neighbor, but shall not incur sin because of him."* Thus gossip or slander (or any of the other sins

mentioned) is forbidden by the Law of God. This is the negative requirement of the Ninth Commandment. The positive requirement is that we are responsible to speak the truth at all times, and to correct those slanders and gossips by bringing them before a lawful court which God has ordained to hear such accusations, civil or ecclesiastical. We are implored in Proverbs 25:9-10 *“Debate your case with your neighbor himself, and do not disclose the secret to another; lest he who hears it exposes your shame, and your reputation be ruined.”* Romans 12:14-21: *“Bless those who persecute you; bless and do not curse. Rejoice with those who rejoice, and weep with those who weep. Be of the same mind toward one another. Do not set your mind on high things, but associate with the humble. Do not be wise in your own opinion. Repay no one evil for evil. Have regard for good things in the sight of all men. If it is possible, as much as depends on you, live peacefully with all men. Beloved, do not avenge yourselves, but rather give place to wrath; for it is written, “Vengeance is mine, I will repay,” says the Lord. “Therefore if your enemy hungers, feed him; If he thirsts, give him a drink; For in so doing you will heap coals of fire on his head.” Do not be overcome by evil, but overcome evil with good.”*

Therefore, Christians may be involved in the use of the internet as long as they do not violate the Law of God (such as the discussion of theological and practical issues), but avoiding the sins enumerated above. However, they are forbidden by the Ninth Commandment to so participate in web-logs in which the authors’ or contributors’ do manifest a hatred of others through slander and gossip, even upon the pretence of humility, excusing their actions with feigned concern for their reclamation, do sin against them and against God. Further, the Ninth Commandment permits those who have been injured publicly by slander and gossip, by the unrighteous actions of those who seek to defame their good name, to publicly defend their cause for establishing the truth, and or to defend others who have been so injured. For this reason such actions are considered just and good according to the Law of God.