

Secret Fraternal Organizations

This pastoral letter sets forth theologically the biblical principles which should be applied to the questions we face as Christians and churches in evaluating and responding to the issue regarding criteria for evaluating membership in secret fraternal organizations.

A pastoral letter is intended to shine the light of God's word broadly on a general area of concern to the Church. Requiring the approval of only one General Assembly, it is not as definitive as a Position Paper, which requires the approval of two General Assemblies (including a minimum of one year circulation among the presbyteries). The primary purpose of a pastoral letter is to guide churches within the EPC rather than to identify our positions to the world. (Act of Assembly 97-13)

The 14th General Assembly (1994) of the Evangelical Presbyterian Church directed the permanent Theology Committee "to consider the preparation of a statement offering possible caution and guidance regarding membership and participation in secretive fraternal organizations, especially in regard to implicit religious or pseudo-religious aspects of their practice that may have bearing upon the authority and sufficiency of Scripture, the Person and Deity of Jesus Christ, the way of salvation, and the importance of solemn oaths, for consideration by the subsequent General Assembly."

In response to that directive, the permanent Theology Committee offers this letter of pastoral advice for individuals and courts of the church.

In the twentieth century, several evangelical and Reformed denominations have undertaken studies of specific secretive fraternal organizations.¹ Those studies generally have been carried out with zeal for God's truth and the honor and purity of Christ's bride, the church. They also have been marked by deep concern for the church's peace, for many members of those denominations have been members of the organizations under review and possess loyal commitments to those organizations, citing the public good they perform and the moral virtues of their purposes.

This letter of pastoral advice responds in terms of general principles and admonitions which, by virtue of its adoption by the General Assembly, the courts of the church should heed. The general nature of this letter is for two reasons. First, our directive was to consider the preparation of a statement on the general subject of secretive fraternal organizations, not to engage in an evaluative study of any specific one(s). Secondly, the Constitution of the church already provides the standards and processes by which to regulate membership in churches, sessions and presbyteries. The Committee finds these provisions sufficient and beneficial for the governing of the Church. We strongly urge the courts to make good and proper use of them with all sincerity and brotherly love (*Rom. 12:10*).

OATHS AND VOWS

Participation in secretive fraternal organizations naturally involves the taking of oaths and vows, both with respect to commitment to the organization and secrecy surrounding some of its practices. Lawful oaths are part of religious worship (*WCF 22.1*). Only by the name of God should Christians swear any oath (*22.2*), but only on proper occasions should such oaths be taken at all (*22.1, 22.3*). The necessary elements of a lawful oath consist in a complete conviction of the truth of the oath being sworn, that it be good and just, and that the one swearing has the ability to perform what is sworn (*22.3*). These elements reflect the seriousness which attaches to such exercises.

However, lawful oaths are to be meaningful and helpful. They reflect the seriousness and importance of the occasion and the earnestness of the one swearing. Moreover, such vows (*e.g., the Hippocratic oath, marriage vows*) aid the swearer by binding the swearer to faithful conduct in the future when unforeseeable circumstances might tempt him to depart from his Christian duty. As such, lawful oaths can give confidence to others and ourselves of the weight of what we say, give expression to our faith in the God of Providence, and provide future help in doing what is right.

Conversely, oaths can be harmful to us. An oath carries the implied imprecation of God's disfavor upon one who would break the oath, subjecting ourselves to God's judgment on us if we are not true to our word (*Exod. 20:7*). Swearing by any but God is idolatry, since the oath professes the reality, presence and power of a false god.

In light of these aspects of taking oaths, we offer the following pastoral advice:

Oaths should be taken sparingly (*Eccl. 5:4-6, Matt. 5:34-37*). Because oaths bind future conduct in unforeseeable circumstances, oaths may come in conflict with one another.

Unless required by lawful authority (*WCF 22.3*), oath swearing should be accompanied by healthy hesitation.

Oaths should be taken sincerely. One should swear to nothing but what he is completely convinced is true (*WCF 22.3*). This requires careful consideration of what is being sworn. Because our Lord Himself is truth (*John 14:6*), we are bound to truth. Further, in days of great falsehood and insincerity in our world, the church of Christ should be even more aware of its identity as the pillar and support of the truth (*1 Tim. 3:15*). The dealings of Christians involve the integrity of the church. Serving God in sincerity and truth (*Joshua 24:14*) is the converse of idolatry. This involves not merely the truth of vows as they are understood in our minds, but as they are understood by those to whom they are sworn. A Christian may not swear to do things which those present would reasonably construe differently or swear to a god whom others would reasonably understand as a different god. Since oaths are only to be sworn to the one true God, only those who profess belief in Him may so swear. Unbelievers may comfortably swear a particular oath in the name of a god, (*1 Corinthians 8:5-6*), but it is idolatrous for a Christian to share in that oath. This is surely not the intention of well-meaning Christians, but they must look to the results of their actions and not solely their personal intentions.

OFFICERS AND MEMBERS

Members of congregations swear submission to the government and discipline of the church (G. 9-2). Members who swear oaths in conflict with their binding oaths to Christ and His church should receive proper pastoral care in being convicted of this.

However, complete adherence to the standards of the Evangelical Presbyterian Church is not required of them. Officers of the church, on the other hand, take vows holding them to a higher standard. These vows include commitment to the standards, government and discipline of the Church. When these vows are taken insincerely or when other vows are taken which would stand in conflict with these, the officer sacrifices his integrity and the peace and purity of the church are eroded. Church officers are to be, above all others, people of truth. "Furthermore, you shall select out of all the people able men who fear God, men of truth, those who hate dishonest gain; and you shall place these over them (Exod. 18:21 NASV). When officers show themselves to have taken their vows lightly, capriciously or insincerely, or when they enter into other vows which would be in conflict with these, the Constitution prescribes measures which would correct those officers.

TEACHING AND PRACTICE

Although the taking of vows is a significant factor to be considered in the propriety of secretive fraternal organizations, it is those vows in connection with the teaching and practice of such organizations which may present serious difficulties for the Christian. Questions which should be asked include the following: Does the organization's teaching conflict with Scripture? Does it promote a false understanding of God or man? Are the deeds it commends and actually produces consistent with Christian conduct?

The good works that such organizations produce are often cited by proponents as the basis for their legitimacy. However, the benefit of their deeds does not equate with the merit of their teachings. If this were not so, many heretical sects of our day would also commend themselves.

As part of the subject of practice, the principle of secrecy must be considered. One must determine what the basis for that secrecy is. While it may serve as a binding force within the organization, it also may be a veil for exclusionary practices. Despite claims to the contrary, the practice of secrecy may indeed be to exclude people on the basis of race, class, political affiliation, religion, etc.

The most serious aspect to consider in the area of teaching and practice is whether the organization is a church. If so, its doctrine and practice must be subject to the standard of Scripture. Even if it meets biblical standards, it is not a member congregation of the Evangelical Presbyterian Church and therefore makes for a direct conflict between its and the Church's interests.

Many secretive fraternal organizations would strongly deny that they were churches. However, in spite of claims to the contrary, an organization might be a de facto church, i. e. taking upon itself teaching and practice, either explicitly or implicitly, which belongs exclusively to Christ's church. The ecclesial or non-ecclesial function of the organization is decisive for participating or not.

If an organization prescribes teaching pertaining to God, His nature, the nature of man and the way in which

God relates to man, it is accountable to the standards of Scripture. If a member is required to affirm belief in non-biblical positions on such matters, he is contradicting the word of God. Such matters, as matters of faith, belong to the church. And an organization which takes upon these matters of faith is taking upon itself the function of the church.

If in the practices of an organization it takes upon itself the functions of the church, it is a de facto church in spite of claims to the contrary. Such practices include elements of worship, e.g., corporate prayer and the administration of sacraments or pseudo-sacraments. Therefore, such an organization would be subject to the marks of a true church and, if found wanting, would rightly fall under condemnation. Those marks are **1)** scriptural discipline practiced, **2)** the Word rightly proclaimed, and **3)** the sacraments properly observed (G.1-5). But even if found true to those marks, membership in both the organization and the Evangelical Presbyterian Church would be in conflict because of the conflict of vows taken to both.

OTHER CONSIDERATIONS

Aside from the serious questions which should attend the subjects of vows, teaching and practice, several other considerations should be addressed in determining whether membership in a particular secretive fraternal organization is compatible with membership and/or officership in the Evangelical Presbyterian Church. Does time spent, use of resources and commitment to relationships in the fraternal organization indicate that the member's first loyalties are there rather than to Christ and His Church? Or rather does Christ come first, as evidenced through behavior in these areas?

CONCLUSION

An individual Christian must ask himself, in light of the above considerations, whether he can, in good conscience, commit himself to the ideals of a particular secretive fraternal organization. In a day when words tend to mean less, Christians must take seriously more than ever their own words and the words of others when they take vows. Even in the diligent keeping of those vows, Christians seriously err when those organizations take upon themselves the function of the church and when their teaching and practice diverge from biblical standards.

The courts of original jurisdiction must always be diligent in discerning the character and other qualifications of officers of the church. Sessions and presbyteries in particular must ensure observance of the high standards required of deacons, ruling elders and teaching elders. These standards must be attended to both in considering candidates for office and evaluating those holding office. It is certain that, unless the fidelity of the Church begin in its officers, it will not be found in its members.

1E.G. Christian Reformed Church, General Association of Regular Baptist Churches, Lutheran Church--Missouri Synod, Presbyterian Church in America, Reformed Presbyterian Church, Southern Baptist Convention.

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