

VETERANS' ORGANIZATIONS EXAMINED IN THE LIGHT OF SCRIPTURE

Theoretically, all veterans organizations are purely civic groups in which all American veterans in good standing are eligible for membership. They propose to perpetuate the ties of comradeship and friendship formed during wars, to provide a congenial atmosphere for the exchange of experiences in the war, to arrange pleasant entertainment for the members, to stimulate love and loyalty toward the fatherland and a patriotic support of our government, and to alleviate the distress of needy veterans and their families.

The Bible does not offer specific advice to Christians concerning membership in civic organizations, and therefore the Church also wisely refrains from doing so. Hence membership in a veterans organization is in itself an adiaphoron, just as is membership in the local fire brigade, the Town Club, the Isaac Walton League, the Democratic Party and countless other purely civic organizations.

One important fact should, however, be borne in mind by every Christian in regard to his membership in such a civic group. The Lord is extremely concerned about our citizenship in His spiritual kingdom. He has made us a peculiar people through the Gospel of salvation in Christ. Our viewpoints, our ideals, our critical approach to matters of this life have been so radically changed by the Gospel that we are misfits in every civic group.

We differ basically with unbelievers and with members of sectarian churches, on the essentials of patriotism, of world peace, on what constitutes wholesome, unobjectionable amusement, and on countless other matters. We cannot rub elbows with the ungodly and the errorists in the close association of a civic organization for any length of time without being confronted with the dilemma of either confessing or denying our Christian principles.

A Christian will take that into consideration before joining any civic group. He will ask himself whether he is willing and prepared to meet such situations without flinching, and whether he is ready to bear the results of his testimony, ready to be looked upon as a kill-joy, a narrowminded fellow, and a general nuisance. "If ye were of the world", the Savior says, "the world would love his own; but because ye are not of the world, but I have chosen you out of the world, therefore the world hateth you." John 15, 19.

It is quite true of course that a Christian may frequently be confronted with this task of testifying against sin and unbelief in the ordinary walks of life. But this is not purely a matter of his choice. God frequently creates our environment for us and leads us into the calling and occupation in which we are to provide a living for ourselves and our family. If under such conditions the Christian is compelled to testify concerning the hope that is within him, he has the assurance that the Lord will guide and support him. When we join a civic group, however, we are voluntarily doing something whereby we may be courting trouble. (Paul's words, 1 Cor. 5, 18f, often quoted against what has been said, actually support it!)

What has been stated up to this point, has reference also to veterans organizations which are strictly of a civic nature. As a matter of fact, however, there are few, if any, veterans groups of this type. Everyone of the larger veterans organizations has introduced religious forms, rites, and ceremonies, and this makes it quite another matter, one of grave concern to the Church. We find among the officers of these organizations a chaplain who functions as a minister of religion and is in charge of all religious ceremonies of the body. Furthermore, these organizations have provided a manual of ceremonies, commonly called a ritual, which prescribes how the various religious functions are to be carried out and which usually contains the prayers for the ceremonies and rites.

We shall have occasion to refer to these features in greater detail later on. For the present, however, we aim to present certain fundamental principles which should guide us, both as American citizens and as members of the Church, in correctly appraising the religious element in these organizations.

As American citizens we have this to say. Our veterans fought as citizens of the United States, not as members of any religious body. Differing widely in their religious beliefs, they were one in their loyalty to our government and in the faithful performance of their civic duties. Our veterans organizations were established for the benefit of all veterans who are citizens of this country. The comradeship which they wish to cultivate and the interests which they desire to protect lie altogether in the field of citizenship, and not in that of religion. Therefore we may rightly expect that they restrict themselves exclusively to matters which all citizens have in common. Every member should have the assurance that he will suffer no embarrassment because of his race, his color, or his creed.

Hence we as American citizens maintain that it is inconsistent on the part of veterans' organizations to introduce religious beliefs and ceremonies into a civic body such as theirs. Our Constitution and the Bill of Rights guarantee full freedom of conscience to every citizen and forbid all religious tests and any discrimination on the grounds of a man's faith or of his unbelief. Even the atheist enjoys all rights of citizenship and is eligible for public office.

Thus we have the right to expect that the adherents of every faith may participate in all functions of a veterans' organization without relinquishing any tenet or principle of their Church, "rendering unto Cæsar the things which are Cæsar's, and unto God the things that are God's." The happiness of the individual and the welfare of our country demand that the separation of church and state be jealously guarded and faithfully maintained.

We see a definite threat to our American institutions for which our veterans fought, suffered, and bled, in the ever increasing introduction of the element of religion into our civic affairs. Against this threat we raise our voice, dedicating ourselves anew to the American principle of the complete separation of Church and State.

But what are our Lutheran veterans to do about this? God's Word has something important to say about a Christian's membership in an organization which has religious tenets, ceremonies, and practices. St. John writes, "Beloved, believe not every spirit, but try the spirits whether they are of God: because many false prophets are gone out into the world. Hereby know ye the Spirit of God: Every spirit that confesseth that Jesus Christ is come in the flesh is of God; and every spirit that confesseth not that Jesus Christ is come into the flesh is not of God." 1 John 4, 1-3.

It is God's solemn admonition, therefore, that we try the spirits which confess religious beliefs before we enter into closer association with them. "The veterans organization most assuredly have religious tenets. Hence it behooves us to make certain whether they are one with us in faith, that their religion is our religion, and that their God is our God, before we seek membership there. If their confession of faith differs from ours, then there remains but one course for us to follow. The Bible clearly says, "Now I beseech you, brethren, mark them which cause divisions and offenses contrary to the doctrine which ye have learned; and avoid them." Rom. 16, 17.

Now, then, what is this religion of the leading veterans organizations? The answer to that question is really very simple. Since they aim to enroll as members all American veterans of every race and creed and insist on providing for this motley group a religious atmosphere agreeable to all, their religion cannot be the religion of the Christian Church. They cannot confess that Jesus is the Son of God come into the flesh to save man from sin and damnation, and therefore they are spirits that are not of God.

It becomes very apparent that this assumption is well founded when we study the rituals of these veterans organizations. Since prayers are quite a reliable gauge of a man's religion, we shall first investigate the prayers found in the rituals. Every Christian knows the words of the Savior, "Whatsoever ye shall ask in My name, that will I do, that the Father may be glorified in the Son." John 14, 13. It is inconceivable that a Christian would pray otherwise than in the name of Jesus, because he knows that we have access to our heavenly Father only through our dear Savior. On the other hand, we have still to find a single prayer in the ritual of any veterans organization which addresses God in the name of Jesus Christ, the Savior of men.

We bring as examples the introduction and close of several prayers. From the Ritual of the Veterans of Foreign Wars: "O Sovereign Ruler of the Universe, Who art the Lord of Hosts and God of peace; without Thee our efforts are in vain.... These and all other necessary blessings we ask of Thee, O Thou mighty Ruler of the Universe. Amen. -- Almighty Commander, the hour has come when we must separate and return to the duties of life.... May Thy good Providence shield us from all harm and bring us together again in true Comradeship and Peace. Amen. -- From the Manual of the American Legion: "Almighty God, Father of all mankind and Judge over nations, we pray thee.... We remember lovingly before Thee our departed comrades. May their splendid example guide us, now and forevermore. Amen. -- Eternal God, Supreme Commander of us all ... Inspire us by their example so to live that we may die worthy of their sacrifice. Amen."

We see, then, that all these prayers are Christless prayers, and we have every reason to believe that the Savior's name is purposely omitted. When men pray thus, they are not praying to our God. No true Christian can pray with them. Incidentally, the ritual of the Veterans of Foreign Wars will require that each member joins audibly in the Amen of every prayer.

We say the ritual will require this, for the reason that the ritual of the American Veterans of World War II has not as yet been published. We have received the following communication from their headquarters in reference to prayers: "The rituals of some of the other veterans organizations provide stereotyped prayers for use in post meetings, funerals and other ceremonial occasions. In preparing our own ritual, it was my thought that as our members are of many faiths, it would be best to permit the Chaplain to pray in words of his own choosing. We have, therefore, included no set prayers in the ritual ... Our ritual provides, however, that all meetings be opened and closed with a prayer by the Chaplain."

The solution proposed here by the National Commander of this organization will hardly give us cause to believe that the Chaplain will pray prayers in the name of Christ, since these are to be for "members of many faiths". But even if this were to occur, our Lutheran veterans would still be placed into a situation in which they would be compelled to practice prayer fellowship with members of other faiths, and this the Bible forbids us to do.

In the case of the American Legion we have statements by men whose word we have no reason to doubt that this organization issued a new ruling some years ago. According to this ruling the prayers must be omitted at any meeting of local Posts if a member protests against their use. We do not, however, find a statement to this effect in the latest copies of the Legion's By-Laws or in its Manual of Ceremonies. Unfortunately the national headquarters of the American Legion have not seen fit as yet to answer our letter in which we referred also to this concession.

Until the Legion officially abolishes the Chaplain's office and its ritual, our Lutheran veterans will do well to remember that their affiliation with the Legion silently condones the official stand of this organization according to which the introduction of religion is a proper policy. The time may come when a Lutheran Legionaire may find himself in the unpleasant position of being urged by his conscience to protest against religious ceremonies of some sort at some meeting of the Legion, while at the same time he will be tempted to violate his religious convictions by remaining silent.

We have discoursed some of the important and fundamental principles involved in the evaluation of veterans organizations. First we sought to learn how a Christian would view the desirability of becoming a member in them if they were strictly civic organizations, offering nothing that might be objectionable to the veteran as a citizen of the United States.

Next, having found that all major veterans organizations are not genuine civic organizations, since they have introduced the element of religion, we studied them anew in the light of this fact. We attempted to find out, what, if any, objections of a basic nature we might have, first as American citizens, and secondly as Christians, to membership in so-called civic organizations of this sort.

We are ready now to round out our examination by bringing these findings to bear upon each of the three major veterans bodies individually. Let us begin by taking up the case of the Veterans of Foreign Wars. Their ritual reveals the grave fact that they are actually nothing less than a secret fraternity, a lodge for American veterans. Our request to headquarters for a copy of their ritual went unheeded, but we had a copy at our disposal nevertheless. In it we found an elaborate ceremony of initiation. The recruit is required to take a solemn oath before an altar on which are placed an open Bible and an American flag. In swearing the oath, he places the left hand upon the flag, and raises his right hand, saying: "In the presence of Almighty God and the members of this Order here assembled I (name) do, of my own free will and accord, solemnly promise and declare....."

As in the lodge, the veteran obligates himself to keep certain promises before knowing what he is to promise therein. He pledges himself, among other things, to comply with the Ritual, never to make known the work of this Order to an outsider, and to consider this pledge binding even after his affiliation with the organization has ceased.

To swear an oath merely in order to become a member of a civic organization is frivolous and blasphemous. It profanes, or makes unworthy, the holy name of God. No sincere Christian will pledge himself to something by an oath unless he is firmly convinced that he can do so in the fear of God. If this he can be convinced only if he knows beforehand the matter to which he is to pledge himself. The Bible does not leave us in doubt as to the seriousness of swearing an oath. "Thou shalt fear the Lord thy God and serve Him and shalt swear by His name" Deut. 6, 13. "Ye shall not swear by My name falsely, neither shalt thou profane the name of thy God." Lev. 19, 12. The Savior Himself adds this weighty admonition: "Let your communication

be, Yea, yea; Nay, nay. For whatsoever is more than these cometh of evil." Here Jesus clearly indicates, as the context shows, that oaths are neither necessary nor permissible in the ordinary course of our association with our fellowmen. There we are not to go beyond the use of the simple affirmative or negative statement of fact. And precisely that, and nothing more, dare be required of men when they are to be accepted as members in a civic organization.

But to pledge one's self by an oath to support the Ritual would be sinful also because of the un-scriptural matter it contains. We have already referred to the prayers, which studiously avoid any mention of our Savior. But the Ritual contains other material which is utterly contrary to the clear teachings of God's Word. Surely the Bible would condemn us if we were to give assent to these words, to be spoken by a chaplain in the funeral address: "Our Comrade is in the hands of our Heavenly Father, and 'God giveth His beloved sleep' ". & indeed, every "Comrade" is in the hands of God; but many of them are not "His beloved", and these He will condemn to eternal perdition.

Neither would a true Christian join the Veterans of Foreign Wars in their denial of the fundamental teachings of Jesus and His holy apostles that all have sinned and come short of the glory of God, and that we are saved by grace without the deeds of the law. Yet he would so deny these vital doctrines of Christianity, if he were to support the closing words of this funeral address: "Let each one be so loyal to every virtue, so true to every friendship, so faithful in the remaining marches, that he will be ready to fall out and take his place in the Great Review hereafter; not in doubt, but with faith that the merciful Captain of our salvation will call him to that fraternity which on earth and in heaven remains unbroken."

Can the damnable principle of work-righteousness be more crassly expressed than in these words? And what a false hope is this which is expressed in the statement about a fraternity which "on earth and in heaven remains unbroken"! The Word of God does not even promise us that all members of those "fraternities" which we generally call Christian congregations will also be together in Paradise; how much less can this be said of the membership of a veterans organization?

Other condemning material could be produced from the Ritual of the Veterans of Foreign Wars. What has been stated should suffice, however, to convince any Christian within our Synod that a Lutheran veteran could not join this organization without becoming disloyal to his Savior and unfaithful to the Word of Salvation.

Now for a few remarks about the American Veterans of World War II. Although we have not as yet received the ritual of this organization, the information received from the Adjutant General that such a ritual will be issued and that "all meetings will be opened and closed with prayer by a Chaplain" compels us to take the same stand as above over against this body. It has been amply shown from Scripture that a Christian cannot become a member of a body in which he must practice spiritual fellowship with men of other faiths or to be "unequally yoked together with unbelievers". 2 Cors. 6, 14.

And finally, what about the American Legion? The Legion is a product of World War I. The question as to whether a Lutheran veteran might rightly be a member of this organization has been an issue in our Synod ever since the Legion was founded. Many of the Lutheran veterans of the first World War have held and still hold membership in this body. Because the concession to omit prayers at Post meetings upon protest is generally believed to have been granted by the Legion, the opinion appears to prevail in our Synod that membership in the Legion involves no denial of the truth and does not constitute unionistic practice.

We do not question for a moment the utter sincerity of those who take this stand. Much less would we presume to sit in judgment over the validity of their conviction. Yet we feel constrained to reiterate our misgivings in regard to membership even in this organization for veterans.

First, we repeat that Legion headquarters have, upon our inquiry, neither affirmed nor denied that the concession referred to constitutes an official action on the part of the national body. Although an affirmation on their part would, from their point of view, obviously tend to increase Lutheran membership in their organization, they have not answered the letter we addressed to them two months ago.

Secondly, we have no official assurance that a protest against religious ceremonies and prayers, if it were to be voiced at a state or national convention, would be likewise respected by the assembled Legionaires. If a Lutheran veteran attending such a convention as a delegate were confronted with sinful unionistic practice of this kind, would he not be under terrific inner pressure to abstain from testifying against it and thus becoming a traitor to his Savior's cause? After all, a Lutheran Legionaire has reason to fear that such an occasion may arise at any time, simply because the Legion continues to retain as an inherent feature of its organization the office of the Chaplain as well as its Manual of Ceremonies, or Ritual. One might well ask whether every member of the organization does not thereby become responsible for these objectionable features.

Finally, we believe that our introductory remarks about membership in a civic organization should also make us hesitant about seeking membership in the Legion. As Christians, we are bound up in loving, intimate fellowship with Christ crucified, who is "unto the Jews a stumblingblock, unto the Greeks foolishness; but unto them which are called, both Jews and Greeks, Christ the power of God, and the wisdom of God." 1 Cor. 1, 23-24.

It should be clear to followers of Christ before entering into closer fellowship with larger civic groups such as the veterans organizations that they will be at odds not only in their innermost heart and being but also by the testimony of their sanctified lips with the great majority of members in these organizations. We are under no obligation whatever to become members therein. The question, therefore, which every Lutheran veteran should prayerfully seek to answer is whether he shall of his own volition enter into association with a body in which, as he knows, the great majority professes a faith contrary to the Gospel of Jesus Christ or is entirely hostile even to God. Are these not the people concerning whom the apostle says to all children of God, "Come out from among them, and be ye separate, saith the Lord, and touch not the unclean thing; and I will receive you, and will be a Father unto you, and ye shall be My sons and daughters, saith the Lord Almighty." 2 Cor. 6, 17, 18.

May our dear Lord guide and counsel the members of our Synod and graciously grant wisdom and holy courage that we may be as one in rightly judging these veterans organizations. Let us walk worthy of the Lord, as the children of light, increasing in the knowledge of God, strengthened with all might according to His glorious power, who hath delivered us from the power of darkness, and hath translated us into the kingdom of His dear Son; in whom we have redemption through His blood, even the forgiveness of sins.

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