

How Does the Matter of Fellowship Enter into Membership in Veterans' Organizations?

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The matter of fellowship for Christians in Veterans' Organizations is not a new problem. In 1919 and 1921 a committee of the Missouri Synod met with the American Legion. The purpose was to call attention to the American Legion's religious elements in their organization that were offensive to our Lutheran Christian Church and hopefully to change them.

After World War II, with the influx of veterans into our WELS congregations, our Synod wrote a lengthy tract on this subject entitled "Veterans' Organizations Examined in the Light of Scripture."

Since that time, individual pastors have questioned the practices of the VFW and the American Legion as to their involvement of religion in their meetings, initiations, and different types of worship services.

At present, I suppose, the official stand of our Synod would still be the tract "Veterans' Organizations Examined in the Light of Scripture" and this quote from *The Shepherd Under Christ*, 2nd edition 1981, page 350:

"Although the Veterans' Organizations provide for the office of a chaplain and certain rituals and prayers, these religious features are not mandatory nor necessary for the existence of the organization. They often are omitted at the local post. The burial rite is available upon request."

To see whether that still should be our position today, let's examine the VFW's and the American Legion's involvement in religion.

The VFW and the American Legion are civic organizations and are not in the class of the lodges for the following reasons. While oaths in lodges, perhaps not in all, are taken in secret and involve a person in swearing in uncertain things, the oaths of the VFW and American Legion pledge are not secretive and in the case of the VFW, even optional. This is stated in the National By Laws of the VFW Section 108:

"When an applicant has been accepted by vote of the Auxiliary, she shall be notified orally or in writing that her application has been accepted. The Auxiliary shall notify the newly elected member to appear at a stated time to receive the ceremonial obligation; however, in the event she shall have subscribed to the printed obligation on the reverse side of the application card, she shall be considered a member in good standing as soon as elected and it shall not be obligatory for her to take the ceremonial oral obligation."

While the VFW oath is optional, it, however, should be noted that this oath, if taken, requires swearing in uncertain things. "Should my membership with this organization cease in any way, I will consider this pledge as binding outside of the order as though I had remained a member of the same. I do so promise." To that, Scripture replies, "Above all, my brothers, do not swear - not by heaven or by earth or by anything else. Let your 'Yes' be yes, and your 'No,' no, or you will be condemned." James 5:12; Mark 6:21-28 also applies.

Another reason why the VFW and the American Legion are not to be classified with lodges is that they do not have a religious creed nor do they profess to offer religious or ethical instructions. While it's true that they do not have the above, like the lodge, they use prayers and hymns in their rituals and meetings. In regard to that, let's take a look at how our members are to deal with it, what options the organizations give them, and the dangers of belonging to such an organization even when you use the options.

Looking first at the religious aspects of the VFW, what does one of our members face should he or she join? As far as the initiation and meetings are concerned, the prayers are not optional according to the manual. While those prayers according to *The Shepherd Under Christ* are not necessary for the existence of the organization, how many posts follow that mandate and even care to accommodate themselves to it? The commander in Menomonee said she opened and closed her meeting with a prayer and that it was mandatory. She said she couldn't see anything wrong with that. While our members probably will argue, we are praying to our God, do the others in the group know that? How can we who are to be the lights of the world mislead and guide others on a path that leads them to hell through the use of a unionistic prayer?

The only place that prayer is optional for the VFW is in the Burial Service, which reads:

"An Auxiliary may offer to hold Memorial Services for a deceased member by contacting the family without waiting for a request from the family. Any part of the burial prayer that may conflict with any religious belief may be omitted."

Should a WELS member attend a Memorial Service, the religious element is abominable. In the service, the first verse of "Abide With Me" is sung. In an address by the president and chaplain, Jesus' words are read, "I am the Resurrection and the Life." This is followed by a quote from the chaplain that makes salvation dependent not on Christ, but on our good works.

"Let us so live that when our summons comes, we may depart with the testimony of a good conscience in the comfort of a reasonable religion, with perfect charity for all mankind and a holy hope in the favor of God."

What an offensive and hypocritical hodgepodge this must be to the Lord and should also be to us!

How about the American Legion? Would a member of our Synod fare better here, or worse? In joining the American Legion, according to the manual, more religious options are offered than are offered in the VFW.

In the long form of the initiation, a prayer is included. From the manual it would appear that the initiation is mandatory to becoming a member of the American Legion. There, however, is a short form initiation where there is no prayer. The same procedure is followed in the installation of new officers.

However, sad to say, in regard to prayers being optional, the American Legion is not consistent. Dedications require a prayer as do the opening and closing of meetings. The commander of one of the Legion posts in our area said he never heard of these prayers as being optional.

What types of prayers are used by the American Legion? At funerals, the service begins with a nondenominational prayer followed later by separate prayers written for each major denomination; Protestant, Jewish, and Catholic. The first prayer is particularly offensive. It ends with these words which imply that all legionnaires, regardless of what they believe, enter heaven:

"With the faded blossoms of springtime and the withered leaves of autumn, you have called him (her) to Eternal Peace, to the land of your silent mystery."

To this St. Luke, in Acts 4:12, writes, "Neither is there salvation in any other, for there is none other name under heaven, given among men, whereby we must be saved."

All Legion and VFW prayers address themselves to a false god. Their god finally has to be agreeable to the Jew, Unitarian, Atheist, and Buddhist. In opposition to that, God's Word says in Matthew 4:10, "Jesus said to him, 'Away from me, Satan! For it is written: Worship the Lord your God, and serve Him only.'" Also I John 2:23, "No one who denies the Son has the Father; whoever acknowledges the Son has the Father also."

For a WELS member to pray with them in their worship services is certainly acting contrary to Rom. 16:17. To pray with them in their meetings and initiations, as was pointed out before, is misleading those with

whom we pray to believe that our God is the same as their god, our knowledge of eternal salvation the same as theirs.

Should a WELS member join the American Legion or VFW? Because of their unionistic practices, offensive prayers, inconsistent position on joint prayer, it would be preferable for our members not to join. Should a member join, our pastors certainly would have to make it their business to know what is practiced by that Legion or VFW post and take appropriate action if necessary.

In conclusion, supposing that all religious features of these groups were optional. To our pastors and laymen, we would point out these warnings. The first two are from the tract "Veterans' Organizations Examined in the Light of Scriptures" and the last one from a paper delivered by the sainted Pastor J. C. Dahlke on "The Scriptural meaning of 'Koinonia,' Fellowship, its Manifestations and Restrictions,"

1. 'Civil and Religious Rights Endangered':

"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 rightfully expect that they restrict themselves exclusively to matters which all veterans 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."

2. 'American Legion - Summary':

"A Lutheran Legionnaire has good cause to fear that sooner or later he will be faced with a situation; be it because of unionistic prayers, or be it because of some other un-Christian activity, in which situation he will not only feel painfully out of place, but against which he must also voice his objection for conscience's sake."

The final quote is a lengthy one from Pastor Dahlke's paper, but it is worthwhile hearing and thinking about.

"The Corinthians had been brought into the fellowship with the Triune God through the preaching of the Gospel by the Apostle Paul. In order that this grace be not received in vain (6,1) Paul appeals to them to separate themselves from unbelievers (v. 14): Be ye not unequally yoked together with unbelievers! What he means by that he puts in the form of five questions:

1. What *fellowship* hath righteousness with unrighteousness?
2. What *communion* hath light with darkness?
3. What *concord* hath Christ with Belial?
4. What *part* hath he that believeth with an infidel?
5. What *agreement* hath the temple of God with idols?

In these five questions Paul briefly reviews the scope of fellowship. He clearly implies that its meaning cannot be stretched to include unrighteousness, darkness, Belial, infidel, or idols. Those who are in fellowship with God cannot have any part in these things.

For the Corinthians that meant to avoid all participation in the heathen festivities, things offered to idols; their meals prepared and eaten in connection with their idol worship; it meant no participation in any part of their worship; it meant simply to step out of the heathens' sphere of life. It meant separation from

anything pertaining to unrighteousness, darkness, Belial, infidels, idols. They were to avoid anything and everything which would in any way conflict with their fellowship with God (*Lebensgemeinschaft mit Gott*). The scope of fellowship is narrowed down to those who are *likeminded* on the basis of the Gospel.

The scope of fellowship is just as narrow today as it was in the time of the Apostle Paul. The believers today, to be in fellowship with God, and in a God-pleasing fellowship with one another, must walk in the light of the Gospel. Every fellowship with darkness must be avoided! He must shun anything and everything which would in any way seem to bring him into harmony or conformity with unbelievers. Any union of like and unlike or even a mere mixture, is an abomination unto the Lord, and a very dangerous thing for the soul. (Deut. 7:2,3) (A woman marrying a man to reform him!)

Such a union` or mixture of like and unlike (no unity!), will in no way serve to further the cause of Christ's kingdom. If differences are minimized, compromised, or even wiped out by a broad-minded attitude, (or latitude of theological opinion!), it does not help the unbeliever to come to realization that a change of heart, a change of mind, a change of attitude, is essential in a believer. It will not help the unbeliever to a deeper understanding of God's Word. In a mixture like this it is not the believer who influences the unbeliever, but rather the unbeliever the believer. The unbeliever has nothing to lose in such a combination and everything to gain - outwardly at least; the believer stands to lose everything, even his outward gain - if any - must be counted as loss. Thus a liberal attitude, a compromising spirit, a narrowing down of differences will hinder and hamper the building of the kingdom of God.

God has very precious thoughts toward us, thoughts of salvation and thoughts of peace. God would have all men to be saved! Behold, how good and how pleasant it is for brethren to dwell together in unity (Ps. 133, 1). He who fully realizes this and who fully appreciates the precious and noble privilege of fellowship with God, will so conduct himself in the presence of his God - whose child he is through much undeserved grace - that he will avoid everything which in any way is contrary to this high and noble calling (living fellowship with God - *Lebensgemeinschaft mit Gott*). He will conscientiously and consistently keep himself from anything which might in any way outwardly or inwardly jeopardize his position as a child of God. In all his conversation-walk of life, in his inner thoughts and outward acts he will strive to be a child of God, work out his salvation with fear and trembling (Phil. 2:12), always having as his example the Lord Jesus, who said of Himself: I do always those things that please Him (the Father) (John 8,29). Only such persons may take comfort from God's gracious promise (2 Cor. 6,17,18): "I will receive you, and will be a Father unto you, and ye shall be my sons and daughters." What an encouragement for us to be thus minded when the Apostle now adds (7,1): "Having therefore these promises, dearly beloved, let us cleanse ourselves from all filthiness of the flesh and spirit, perfecting holiness in the fear of God!" There is comfort in separation. The consequences should not fill us with alarm. 2 Tim. 2,19: "Nevertheless the foundation of God standeth sure, having this seal: THE LORD KNOWETH THEM THAT ARE HIS, And, LET EVERYONE THAT NAMETH THE NAME OF CHRIST DEPART FROM INIQUITY."

Every Christian, especially pastors and teachers, and others in responsible positions; should be very careful what they say, write or do. They are responsible to God for all their thoughts and actions. The word of God alone must decide all matters. The foundation of God standeth sure! Even though it would at times seem impossible to carry on our work in such a strict Scriptural way, let us abide by the Word. Even though at times it may be difficult to distinguish between believer and unbeliever, we have the comfort: "The Lord knoweth them that are His." Those who are His must manifest that by separation.

The individual does this by leading a godly life the congregation by departing from a brother that walks disorderly (*ataktos*). Let everyone that nameth the name of Christ depart from iniquity.

As Moses did - we read Hebrews 11,24-26: By faith Moses, when he was come to years, refused to be called the son of Pharaoh's daughter, choosing rather to suffer affliction with the people of God, than to enjoy the pleasures of sin for a season; esteeming the reproach of Christ greater riches than the treasures of Egypt; for he had respect unto the recompense of the reward."

We conclude with this fitting remark from "Veterans` Organizations Examined in the Light of Scripture":

"May our Lord guide and counsel the members of our Synod and graciously grant wisdom and holy courage so that we may be as one in our spiritual evaluation of 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."

After I finished writing this paper, I received letters from the American Legion and Veterans of Foreign Wars. I wrote to them previously, but wasn't sure whether they'd write or if they did, if I'd receive their material on time for the completion of my paper. They, however, graciously responded. They were written in response to the statement from *The Shepherd Under Christ* quoted on page 1 of this paper.

The American Legion sent out, in addition to the letter, their Manual of Ceremonies, the Chaplain's Prayer Manual, and Service to God and Country Manual. The Service to God and Country program is putting religion back into the home and church. Their encouragement for us to do that is commendable. The problem comes when they take an active part in it. Here are a few examples from that manual:

- 1) "Since the essence of this movement is to bring all the people to a realization of their Gods the use of speakers and programs is essential. Local clergy should be invited to speak at Legion meetings during the year. (page 13)
- 2) "The American Legion Encourages every post to sponsor a non-denominational service to honor four chaplains from World War II killed in action, and spread the story of brotherhood as exemplified by their heroic deeds. (page 20)
- 3) "To aid in maintaining this concept, the office of Post Chaplain was constitutionalized and charged with the responsibilities to keep this association steadfast in the minds of the membership." (page 21)
- 4) "Over the years the American Legion has developed ceremonies dealing with several functions of the Post programs. In each case the chaplain has been made an integral part of the ritual. These ceremonies include installation, initiation of new members, etc." (Page 24)
- 5) "All American Legion functions, even those of a purely social nature, should be opened with prayer in recognition of the God who makes our nation and the American Legion possible." (page 29)

While numbers 1 and 2 are optional, should they be practiced by a Post, will our members who belong to that Post, stay away? In regard to point three, a chaplain who takes his job seriously certainly would create spiritual problems for our members. He is given strong encouragement to be faithful in his duties. Again, the best place for our members is not in, but outside of these organizations. I Thess. 5:21, Gal. 5:9, II Cor. 7:1.