

Membership in Secret Societies

Query, 1952

We, the New Hope congregation, in council assembled, petition the district conference of Southern Missouri and Arkansas, assembled in the Carthage, Missouri, church, August 17-20, 1951, to petition Annual Conference to restate the Church of the Brethren interpretation of the New Testament teaching as it relates to secret orders or oath-bound societies.

Mary A. Birkhead, Clerk

Answer of district conference: Passed to Annual Conference.

Orin Harvey, District Clerk

Answer of 1952 Annual Conference: Request is granted by the appointment of a committee to make a study of this problem and to formulate the restatement for the consideration of next year's Annual Conference. Committee: Harper S. Will (convener), Warren D. Bowman, Kenneth I. Morse.

Report of the Committee, 1953

The committee views its assignment as twofold: to make a study of the situation in our churches with regard to membership in secret societies, and to formulate a restatement of our church's position for consideration by Annual Conference. In order to complete a careful study, already initiated this year, the committee reports progress and asks for another year to complete its assignment.

Harper S. Will, Chairman

Warren D. Bowman

Kenneth I. Morse

Answer of 1953 Annual Conference: Report of progress accepted and request for more time granted.

Report of the Committee, 1954

On the basis of information secured from representative pastors and laymen across the brotherhood, the committee concludes that membership in secret societies involves only a small percentage of our members and creates a serious problem for only a few churches. Yet we believe that where such association with secret orders affects the loyalty of members to their church it constitutes enough of a problem that the church should again state its conviction that membership in secret, oath-bound orders represents a compromise with secular standards that is unworthy of a consecrated Christian. The New Testament, though not commenting on secret societies as such, is clearly opposed to the taking of oaths and to associations whose aims may be counter to the ideals of the church. When Christians are confronted with such a conflict of loyalties, they must "seek first the kingdom of God and his righteousness."

We urge pastors, on receiving members, to give specific instruction on the position of the church on this matter, emphasizing the member's primary loyalty to Jesus Christ and his church. We believe that the supreme claims of the church, not only in regard to secret orders but also in relation to other clubs, fraternities, and social and professional organizations should be repeatedly brought to the attention of members. In situations where the effective witness of a local congregation is hindered because of the association of members with secret societies, we recommend that the church leaders seek counsel from the elders' body, the ministerial board, or the board of administration of the district. We recommend that when members continue their participation in secret societies the churches hold them in loving fellowship provided their conduct is otherwise consistent with the Christian faith. At the same time we should seek to make the church so vital and its fellowship so genuine for all members that none will feel the need for associations such as those offered by the fraternal orders.

Harper S. Will, Chairman

Warren D. Bowman

Kenneth I. Morse

Answer of 1954 Annual Conference: Report adopted.