

MEMBERSHIP IN SECRET OATH-BOUND SOCIETIES

The delegates at the 2009 Annual Conference meeting in San Diego considered a query requesting that the Church of the Brethren establish a position on membership in secret oath-bound societies. Instead of establishing a new position on the issue, the delegates decided to *reaffirm the Annual Conference paper passed in 1954 and to appoint a committee of three to suggest ways to educate and inform people about the position of the church.*

It seems important to the appointed Committee that we distinguish between oath-bound secret orders (such as Freemasonry) and other entities (such as labor unions, sororities, Boy Scouts, and service organizations such as the Rotary Club). The labor union, for example, deals with *work issues*. A secret society deals with *faith issues*. Secret societies have a theology. They are interested not only in the relation of people to people, but also in the relation of people to God. One who becomes a Mason, for example, must, by means of a secret oath, profess belief in a supreme being, but to the institution of Masonry it does not matter what "god" it is.

The Church of the Brethren has traditionally not permitted its members to join the Masonic Lodge or any secret oath-bound society. In *The Brethren Encyclopedia* article on "Secret Societies," Donald F. Durnbaugh writes, "For much of their existence, Brethren bodies have forbidden their members to join fraternal orders, or lodges, including such groups as the Free Masons, Odd Fellows, Sons of Temperance, and the Grange" (Volume 2, page 1163). Durnbaugh quoted some principles that led to early Brethren objections to membership in secret societies. They are cited from a small book written by D. W. Kurtz, titled *An Outline of Fundamental Doctrines of Faith*, page 49. Also, J. H. Moore (in *The Brethren Doctrines Defended*, pages 147-149) outlined some principles related to membership in secret oath-bound societies. These principles included objection to the requirement of an oath, the fact that secrecy violates the Christian's mandate to be a light to the world, and objection to the practice of promising redemption and eternal life apart from faith in Jesus Christ.

Attached is a copy of the query about membership in secret societies that was presented to the Annual Conference in 1952, along with the 1954 decision of the Conference, which states the position of the Church of the Brethren on membership in secret societies. The committee that answered the query in the early 1950s expressed concern about oath-taking, conflict of loyalties, and the need 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." Yet, when members continue their participation in secret orders, it was suggested that churches "hold them in loving fellowship" if their conduct was "otherwise consistent with the Christian faith."

Also attached to this report is a list of resources that can be used by those who are interested in pursuing further information about secret societies. Some dedicated Christian education teachers may want to use the resource list to launch a study of secret societies in local churches. The information in the sources does not necessarily express the opinion of the committee members, nor is every resource supportive of the conclusions of the 1954 Annual Conference paper.

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