DISCERNMENT AND CULTURE

The Other Lodges

Why a church that speaks against Freemasonry owes its people a principle, not just a name

Essay · By **Larry Herzog Jr.** · *Ordinary Means*
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The Question Nobody Asks

Plenty of churches will tell you plainly that a Christian should not be a Freemason. Far fewer will say anything about the Odd Fellows hall two blocks down, the Eagles aerie with the Friday fish fry, the Grange hall out on the county road, or the Moose lodge by the highway. Ask about those and you are likely to get a shrug, or "Well, that's different."

Sometimes it is different. But a hundred years ago an American small town might have had a dozen lodges, and nearly all of them were built from the same Masonic pattern: an altar in the middle of the room, a chaplain, opening and closing prayers, an initiation, and an oath. Many of those halls are still standing, and some of the orders are still meeting. A church that draws a line at the Masons owes its people a reason for where the line falls, and that reason has to reach the rest of the street.

This essay takes the reason the church has always given for opposing Freemasonry and applies it, honestly, to the other lodges.

What Is Actually Wrong with the Lodge

The historic Lutheran objection to the lodge was never mainly about secrecy, aprons, or odd titles. Christians may keep a confidence, wear a uniform, and call the man with the gavel whatever the bylaws say. The objection is theological, and it comes down to four things.

First, worship without Christ. The lodge prays. It has a chaplain, an altar, and often an open Bible. But it prays to a god defined broadly enough that the Jew, the Muslim, the deist, and the Christian can all bow together, and the name of Jesus is left out on purpose so that no brother is offended. Jesus does not treat His name as optional: "I am the way and the truth and the life. No one comes to the Father except through Me" (John 14:6). A prayer that sets that name aside to keep the room comfortable is not a neutral prayer. It is a different religion.

Second, salvation by character. Lodge ritual teaches by allegory, and the allegory nearly always runs in one direction: a man improves himself by the virtues of the order and is fitted at last for the lodge above. That is the opposite of the gospel. We are not made fit for heaven by smoothing our rough edges. We are declared righteous for Christ's sake, through faith, apart from works (Romans 3:28).

Third, oaths of unknown content. The candidate swears his obligation before he has heard what it contains. Lutherans have never said every oath is sinful; the Augsburg Confession (Article XVI) expressly allows the Christian to swear when the government requires it. But Scripture warns against the thoughtless oath (Leviticus 5:4), and swearing blind before an altar is about as thoughtless as an oath can be.

Fourth, the lodge funeral. This is where the first three come together, and where they do the most damage. Most of the old orders had their own burial service, read by their own chaplain at the grave. An Odd Fellows memorial prayer from 1928 asks that the living, together with the departed brethren, may "gain admittance to the Celestial lodge above." That promise is made over every brother, whether or not he trusted in Christ. A grieving family hears heaven promised on the strength of a membership card. The church cannot preach a different gospel at the same grave.

Those are the reasons. Not one of them is the word *Mason*. They are tests, and they can be applied to anything.

The Old Secret Orders

Three nineteenth-century orders copied the Masonic lodge most closely. They are the easiest cases, because they fail all four tests in nearly the same way the Masons do.

The Independent Order of Odd Fellows was organized in America in 1819 and is one of the oldest fraternal orders in the country. A new member receives the Initiatory degree, then the lodge degrees of Friendship, Love, and Truth. After that come the Encampment's degrees and the uniformed Patriarchs Militant. Women join through the Rebekahs, which have their own ritual. The lodge room has an altar, regalia, signs, and obligations, and the order shares symbols with Masonry down to the all-seeing eye. Its own historians describe it as interfaith while drawing its lessons from the Bible. Its stated aim is to elevate the character of mankind. And, as noted above, it buries its dead with prayers for admission to the "Celestial lodge above." That is the Masonic pattern exactly: Scripture as a source of moral lessons, Christ left at the door, character as the road upward, and heaven promised at the grave.

The Knights of Pythias were founded in 1864 by Justus Rathbone, who had already belonged to the Masons and the Red Men. The ritual is built on the Greek legend of Damon and Pythias, two friends willing to die for each other. Candidates pass through the ranks of Page, Esquire, and Knight. They must profess belief in a Supreme Being. One of the order's stated tenets is "toleration in religion." The women's auxiliary, the Pythian Sisters, has its own ritual. A pagan legend of friendship stands where the gospel should, and the god of the altar is whatever god the candidate brings.

The Improved Order of Red Men is the strangest of the three. It dresses a Masonic lodge in borrowed Native American costume. Its local lodges are "tribes," its halls are "wigwams," and its three degrees (Adoption, Warrior, and Chief) follow the Masonic first, second, and third degrees. To be adopted, a candidate must believe in the "Great Spirit," the Creator and Preserver of the universe. The women's auxiliary, the Degree of Pocahontas, has a secret ritual and passwords of its own. Here the religion of the lodge is not even disguised in biblical language. The god of the lodge is simply given another name.

The Farm and Insurance Lodges

In the late 1800s, a working family often could not buy life insurance or crop insurance from a company. They got it from a lodge. The fraternal benefit societies sold protection to their members, and nearly every one of them wrapped the policy in a ritual. For many rural families, the first altar outside their church was in the hall of the society that insured them.

The Grange (Order of Patrons of Husbandry) is the one most likely to still have a hall in farm country. It was founded in 1867 by Oliver Kelley, a Mason, and it was soon nicknamed "the Farmer's Masonry." Its first national chaplain, Aaron Grosh, was a Universalist minister. The Grange works seven degrees, and the first four follow the seasons of the farm year. A Bible lies open on an altar in the center of the hall; the National Grange's own guide to a meeting lists other holy texts as optional beside it. The Master gives vows in each degree, and the first-degree candidate is hoodwinked. Three of the officers represent the Roman goddesses Ceres, Pomona, and Flora, and historians describe the ritual as a mixture of Greek and Roman mythology with Bible lessons. The pattern is the familiar one: Scripture on the altar, a god broad enough for anyone, and the seasons of the farm as an allegory of moral growth. Many Grange halls are now mostly community centers, but the degrees are still in the manual.

The Woodmen began with Joseph Cullen Root, who founded the Modern Woodmen of America in 1883 and then the Woodmen of the World in 1890. Their lodge rooms set a tree stump where other orders put an altar, and their initiations confronted the candidate with death and the need to protect his family. The Woodmen of the World took its ritual seriously at least through the 1970s, with an initiation, an obligation, and an annual password. The Modern Woodmen later dropped much of their founder's ritual. The women's societies that grew out of the Woodmen did the same kind of work: the Royal Neighbors of America had officers called the Oracle and Chancellor and a ritual built around five "Graces," and the Neighbors of Woodcraft required each member to renew her obligation every year on "Obligation Night."

The Foresters built their ritual on the legend of Robin Hood. Their local lodges were "courts," and the old ritual brings a candidate in for "initiation into the mysteries of Ancient Forestry," with the officers reporting at the altar. The Independent Order of Foresters printed its own burial service in the same book as its initiation. Today it operates mainly as an insurance company.

The Maccabees took their legend from the Jewish revolt against the Syrians in the Apocrypha. A Maccabee "tent" had a Commander, a Chaplain, and guards. In the Degree of Friendship the officers act out Mattathias and his sons, with the Chaplain playing Eleazar. The motto was "Astra castra, numen lumen": the stars my camp, the Deity my light. Even when a lodge takes its story from Scripture, the light at the center is "the Deity," not Christ.

The Animal Lodges

Between the Civil War and the First World War, a second wave of orders appeared. Historians call them the "animal lodges": Elks, Eagles, Moose, Owls, Orioles. They were mostly social clubs with a benefit fund and a bar. That reputation makes them easy to overlook. But each one adopted a ritual on the lodge pattern, and for a Christian the ritual is the question.

The Elks (Benevolent and Protective Order of Elks) name their ritual, together with their constitution and statutes, as "the supreme law of the order" (Constitution, Article I, Section 1). In the 2012 initiation, the candidate is told he must take "the solemn and binding obligation of our Order" before the ceremony can go on, and assured it will not interfere with his duty to himself or his family. He is then asked one question about faith: "Do you believe in God?" When he answers yes, the chaplain prays. The Elks also have their own funeral rite, the Lodge of Sorrow, which includes prayers. Their annual memorial service is held before the lodge altar. And whenever a lodge is in session or Elks are gathered at eleven o'clock at night, eleven chimes ring and the room pauses for the "Hour of Recollection" in memory of absent and departed members.

The Eagles (Fraternal Order of Eagles) were founded by six theater owners in Seattle in 1898. The order dropped its secret passwords long ago, but it kept a ritual. In the version Lutheran reviewers examined, candidates are brought before the altar and an open Bible to pledge themselves to the teachings of the order. The chaplain asks the blessing of "Almighty and Eternal God" on them.

The Moose (Loyal Order of Moose) use an initiation of about forty-five minutes. The candidate takes the Moose obligation, the prelate offers a prayer at the altar, and the members sing an ode. Every evening at nine o'clock, Moose are directed to face toward Mooseheart, the order's children's home in Illinois, and repeat a silent prayer. The prayer borrows Jesus' words about little children and ends, "God bless Mooseheart." In 2005 the Missouri Synod's theology commission looked at the Moose again. It credited the order's humanitarian work, but it found that the rituals still "require and assume acceptance of religious truths" that conflict with Scripture.

The Owls (Order of Owls) work four degrees, with secret signs, grips, passwords, and a lengthy obligation. A local "nest" has an Invocator who serves as chaplain. The ritual states the lodge's theology more honestly than most: "We advocate no creed. We know there are so many gods, so many creeds, so many paths that wind and wind." That sentence could hang over the door of almost every hall in this essay. The Owls refused to answer the Missouri Synod's inquiries about their ritual in 1947, 1957, 1960, and 1961.

The Orioles (Fraternal Order Orioles) are a small order that still has a few dozen nests. Their ritual resembles the others: an altar in the center of the lodge room, a Bible, prayers, and passwords, with an Initiatory degree and a Supreme degree.

Veterans' Posts and Their Honor Degrees

For many men, the lodge they belong to is the Legion or the VFW. These are different from the old orders in important ways, and they deserve to be treated fairly. But they also have chaplains, altars, and prayers, and two of them have secret "honor degrees" that look much more like the lodge.

The American Legion, the VFW, and the DAV open and close their meetings with a chaplain's prayer. The Legion's chaplain takes part in the initiation of new members, and its chaplain manual says the Legion embraces all religions and faiths. The VFW sets a Bible on its altar for memorial services, and when a member dies, the chaplain goes to the altar and prays to "Eternal God" for the departed comrade. The VFW chaplain's handbook includes prayers for Catholic, Orthodox, and Jewish members. The DAV's meeting diagram places an altar at the center of the room, with the chaplain's station beside it. The prayers are generic by design.

Still, these are not lodges in the old sense. There is no ladder of degrees, no allegory of a man perfecting himself for heaven, and no secret obligation. The prayers are civic prayers, like an invocation at a city council meeting or a ball game. A Christian veteran can belong, honor the fallen, and decline to lead or join a prayer that deliberately leaves Christ out. The first test applies; the second and third mostly do not. Where a post conducts a funeral rite that promises heaven to every comrade, the fourth test applies too.

The honor degrees are another matter. The **Forty and Eight** began in 1920 as an honor society of the Legion, named for the French boxcars that carried forty men or eight horses. Membership is by invitation, and much of its ritual is secret from outsiders. Its initiation is called a "wreck," and the candidates are "poor goofs." The **Military Order of the Cootie** is the VFW's "honor degree," also founded in 1920. It uses a three-degree secret initiation ritual, and its chaplain, called the Sky Pilot, has a manual that includes "the prayers of the ritual." Both orders are known for good-humored hospital visits and charity, and much of their ritual is meant as fun. But a secret, multi-degree initiation with prayers built into it is exactly the structure the third test asks about. A veteran invited into either one should find out what he will be asked to promise, and to whom the prayers are addressed, before the night of the ceremony.

On Campus

The place where most young Lutherans will meet a lodge ritual today is not a hall on Main Street. It is a fraternity or sorority house. The college Greek system grew up in the same century as the lodges, and many chapters borrowed the same pieces: a secret ritual, an altar or pedestal, an officer called the chaplain, and an oath taken at initiation.

The groups vary widely. Some were founded on explicitly Christian principles. Others draw on classical philosophy or pagan imagery. In one recent case, a Christian student publicly objected after her sorority initiation. She had been sworn at an altar, with a candle burning for the goddess Minerva, to an oath binding her "until final judgment." Whatever the content, the structure is the same everywhere: the ritual is secret until the night of initiation. One national fraternity tells its new members plainly that the ritual "will be revealed to you during your initiation ceremony."

That makes the third test the decisive one. A student cannot weigh an oath he has not been allowed to read. Parents and pastors should teach college-bound young people to ask, before they pledge, what they will be asked to swear, and to whom.

At a Glance

The table gathers every order covered above. "Tests raised" refers to the four tests: (1) worship without Christ, (2) salvation by character, (3) oaths of unknown content, (4) the lodge funeral. Rituals are revised, and local practice often drifts from the book. So read each row as a list of questions to ask, not a verdict on any particular member.

Order	Founded	Ritual elements on record	Tests raised
Odd Fellows and Rebekahs	1819	Altar, obligations, Initiatory plus three lodge degrees; interfaith; burial prayers for the "Celestial lodge above"	1, 2, 3, 4
Knights of Pythias and Pythian Sisters	1864	Ranks of Page, Esquire, Knight; belief in a Supreme Being required; Damon and Pythias legend	1, 2, 3
Improved Order of Red Men and Degree of Pocahontas	1834	Degrees of Adoption, Warrior, Chief; belief in the "Great Spirit" required; secret ritual	1, 2, 3
Grange (Patrons of Husbandry)	1867	Seven degrees; Bible on the altar, other texts optional; chaplain; vows; hoodwinking; Roman goddesses as officers	1, 2, 3
Foresters	1800s	Robin Hood legend; initiation "into the mysteries"; altar; printed burial service	1, 3, 4
Elks	1868	Ritual as supreme law; binding obligation; "Do you believe in God?"; chaplain's prayer; Lodge of Sorrow	1, 3, 4
Woodmen of the World, Royal Neighbors, Neighbors of Woodcraft	1883 to 1890s	Tree-stump altar; obligation; annual password; yearly Obligation Night	1, 3
Maccabees	1878	Three degrees; chaplain; Maccabean legend; "the Deity my light"	1, 3
Eagles	1898	Altar and open Bible; pledge; chaplain's prayer to "Almighty and Eternal God"	1, 3

Order	Founded	Ritual elements on record	Tests raised
Moose	1888	Obligation; prelate's prayer at the altar; nightly 9 o'clock prayer; LCMS objection renewed in 2005	1, 3
Owls	1904	Four degrees; Invocator; lengthy obligation; "so many gods, so many creeds"	1, 3
Orioles	Early 1900s	Altar, Bible, prayers, passwords; two degrees	1, 3
Forty and Eight, Military Order of the Cootie	1920	Secret initiation by invitation; Cootie works three degrees with ritual prayers	1, 3
Greek-letter chapters	1800s onward	Secret ritual revealed at initiation; oath; often an altar and chaplain	3, often 1
American Legion, VFW, DAV	1899 to 1920	Chaplain; generic prayers; altar (VFW Bible at memorials); no degrees	1; 4 if a rite promises heaven

The Other Ditch

The answer to inconsistency is not a longer blacklist. A church can err in the opposite direction just as easily, by forbidding what God has not forbidden.

The Formula of Concord (Epitome X; Solid Declaration X) teaches that the church may not make necessary what God has left free. Paul is blunter: "It is for freedom that Christ has set us free. Stand firm, then, and do not be encumbered once more by a yoke of slavery" (Galatians 5:1). Eating at the Eagles fish fry, renting the Elks hall for a wedding reception, or carrying a life policy from a society that long ago became an insurance company is not joining in a lodge's worship. Neither is the word *lodge* on a sign.

The Evangelical Lutheran Synod, which descends from the old Norwegian Synod, gives a good example of careful judgment. Asked whether the Sons of Norway is a lodge in the objectionable sense, it answered that the group is a benefit and cultural society, even though it freely calls its chapters "lodges." It quoted Walter Maier Jr.'s distinction: some fraternal insurance orders have dropped their lodge features or excuse members from the ritual, and "a Christian need not question the moral propriety" of joining those. That is the right instinct. Judge the thing by what it actually asks a man to pray, promise, and believe, not by its name, its hall, or its reputation.

A church that skips that work does harm both ways. It teaches people that sin is a matter of logos and memberships, not of what is believed, confessed, and prayed. And it gives the man who knows his lodge does nothing religious every reason to stop listening to the church on everything else.

Name the Principle, Not the Lodge

The way between the ditches is to teach the principle and let it do the sorting. A congregation could say something as simple as this:

> A Christian does not join in worship that deliberately sets Christ aside. A Christian does not accept a ritual that teaches salvation by moral improvement. A Christian does not swear an oath whose content he has not been told. And a Christian does not want to be buried with a promise of heaven the gospel does not make.

That statement condemns Freemasonry, and it says why. It catches the Odd Fellows, the Pythians, and the Red Men for the same reasons. It raises honest questions about the Grange, the insurance lodges, and the Elks, Eagles, Moose, Owls, and Orioles without pretending to know what goes on in every hall in America. It treats a veteran's post fairly. And it will still work fifty years from now, when there are orders none of us have heard of.

Then the real work happens where it always should: in a conversation between a pastor and a member. Not "Are you an Eagle?" but questions like these:

1. What did you promise when you were initiated, and did you know what it was before you promised it?
2. When the chaplain prayed, to whom was he praying? Would he have prayed in Jesus' name?
3. Does the ritual say anything about how a man gets to heaven? What does it say?
4. Does the lodge have its own funeral service? What does it promise at the grave?
5. If you were asked to take part in that ritual again, or to lead it, could you do it with a clear conscience?

Most men in these halls are not there out of false religion. They were invited by a friend, or they followed their father, or they needed the insurance. Many have never thought about these questions. Asking them is not an accusation. It is catechesis. Some will find that their membership touches nothing of the faith. Others will hear the ritual with new ears and walk away on their own. Either way, the church has taught them to judge by the Word instead of by a list.

The Name Above Every Name

Underneath all of this is one question: what do we do with the name of Jesus? The lodge, at its most serious, asks a man to lay that name down at the door so that everyone in the room can pray together. Then it promises him the lodge above anyway. The church cannot ask him to do that, and it cannot keep silent when someone else does.

"Therefore God exalted Him to the highest place and gave Him the name above all names, that at the name of Jesus every knee should bow, in heaven and on earth and under the earth, and every tongue confess that Jesus Christ is Lord, to the glory of God the Father" (Philippians 2:9–11).

That is the line. It runs through the Masonic temple, and it runs through every other hall where men gather at an altar to pray. A church that knows where the line is and why it is there will not need a list. It only needs to keep teaching its people the Name.

Scripture quotations are from the Berean Standard Bible. Lutheran Confessions are cited from the Kolb-Wengert edition of the Book of Concord.

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