

## BENEVOLENT AND PROTECTIVE ORDER OF ELKS

The Benevolent and Protective Order of Elks of the United States (BPOE) was founded in 1868 in New York. The Lodge originated from an informal drinking society formed in 1866 called the Jolly Corks, a group of actors and entertainers under the leadership of Charles Vivian who sought to circumvent New York blue laws. The Elk was chosen as the emblem of the Order because of “a number of attributes [that] were deemed typical of those to be cultivated by members of the fraternity” (fleet of foot, graceful in movement, quick and keen of perception, strong and valiant in defense of its own).”<sup>1</sup>

On its official web site, the BPOE describes its mission as follows:

To inculcate the principles of Charity, Justice, Brotherly Love and Fidelity; to recognize a belief in God; to promote the welfare and enhance the happiness of its Members; to quicken the spirit of American patriotism; to cultivate good fellowship; to perpetuate itself as a fraternal organization, and to provide for its government, the Benevolent and Protective Order of Elks of the United States of America will serve the people and communities through benevolent programs, demonstrating that *Elks Care and Elks Share*.<sup>2</sup>

In keeping with the objectives of the organization summarized in this mission statement, the BPOE carries out a number of charitable, educational, patriotic, and benevolent activities—with greater emphasis on family participation in recent years. The Elks National Foundation, founded in 1928, is the charitable and humanitarian arm of the Lodge. It provides financial support for philanthropic programs such as drug awareness, the “Hoop Shoot” program for youth, and college scholarships—in addition to support for the BPOE’s National Veterans Service Commission and the Elks National Home. The Elks National Home, established in 1902, is a retirement facility for Elks located in Bedford, Virginia. The Elks National Memorial Building in Chicago was dedicated in 1926 (rededicated in 1946 following World War II) to honor veterans who sacrificed themselves for the nation.

To be eligible for membership in the BPOE, a person must be a citizen of the United States over the age of 21 who believes in God. Following the approval of the application for membership, the applicant and spouse must present themselves for indoctrination, followed by an official rite of initiation. In spite of reports to the contrary, the Elks’ Lodge does not permit “social memberships.”<sup>3</sup>

The Elks Lodge does not have any official auxiliary organizations. The Benevolent and Protective Order of Does, formed and chartered in Omaha, Nebraska, in 1921, has described itself as “a national women’s organization whose members met specified requirements and shared a mutual interest with the Benevolent and Protective Order of Elks.” Application for membership must also be signed by an Elk Sponsor who is an Elk in good standing. Membership requirements are similar to the BPOE.<sup>4</sup>

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<sup>1</sup> *What It Means to Be an Elk*, quoted in Alan Axelrod, *International Encyclopedia of Secret Societies & Fraternal Orders* (New York: Facts on File, Inc., 1996), 75. See also [www.phoenixmasonry.org/masonicmuseum/fraternalism/elks.htm](http://www.phoenixmasonry.org/masonicmuseum/fraternalism/elks.htm)

<sup>2</sup> [www.elks.org/about/news.cfm?StoryID=17263](http://www.elks.org/about/news.cfm?StoryID=17263) These objectives are also presented in the Preamble to the Constitution of the Order (*Constitution and Statutes*, 79).

<sup>3</sup> In March 1992, in response to a specific request in this regard from The Lutheran Church—Missouri Synod’s [LCMS] former Commission on Organizations, a national officer of the BPOE wrote: “You are correct in the statement that there are no ‘social memberships.’ Section 14.130 of the Grand Lodge Statutes specifically provides: ‘A member shall be termed an Elk. A member in good standing shall have the same and equal privileges and immunities with every other member of his Lodge, except as otherwise provided’” (copy in the CTCR’s office). Recently, the national headquarters staff of the BPOE, in a telephone conversation, confirmed that the BPOE, officially, does not provide for a so-called “social membership.”

<sup>4</sup> [www.phoenixmasonry.org/masonicmuseum/fraternalism/elks.htm](http://www.phoenixmasonry.org/masonicmuseum/fraternalism/elks.htm)

## The Rituals of the Order<sup>5</sup>

The Certification page of the Lodge's *Ritual* book quotes the Constitution, Article I, Section 1, as follows: "This Constitution, the Statutes enacted by the Grand Lodge not in conflict therewith, and the RITUAL, WITH THE INSTRUCTIONS THEREIN CONTAINED, SHALL BE THE SUPREME LAW OF THE ORDER" (emphasis original). The General Instructions in the *Ritual* direct all District Deputies and Exalted Rulers to "enforce a strict adherence to the Ritual" and not to "permit the use of any charge, lecture, form, ceremony, form of initiation or regalia other than those prescribed in the Ritual."<sup>6</sup> The content and form of the ritual and its use, therefore, are taken with utmost seriousness by the Lodge.

The religious elements and/or assumptions that are present in the official rites and rituals of the organization are the primary focus of the information provided below. It is assumed that "Elkdom is not a religion" in the ordinary sense of this term. Yet, the rituals of the Order apply a religious test to the candidate for membership, and undergird the objectives and foundational principles of the order with prayers, sacred music and biblical references and allusions.

### *Opening and Closing Ceremonies*

The Opening Ceremony of each meeting of the Lodge begins with the Exalted Rule receiving assurance that all present, including visiting brothers, are qualified to remain. The various officers are then called on to review their duties. The American Flag, emblematic of Charity, is placed into position and the Pledge of Allegiance is recited. An altar, found in the center of every Lodge throughout Elkdom, is arranged and upon it the Esquire places a Bible (received from the Esteem Loyal Knight) with these words: "This is the Bible, the Book of Law, upon which is founded Justice."<sup>7</sup> After the members sing or the organist plays "Nearer, My God, to Thee," the Esquire receives the Elks' Emblem of Brotherly Love, the Antlers, from the Esteemed Lecturing Knight and places the Emblem on the altar. The Star, emblematic of Fidelity, is illuminated and then, to the tune of "Auld Lang Syne," the brothers sing:

Great Ruler of the universe  
All-seeing and benign,  
Look down upon and bless our work,  
And be all glory Thine;  
May Charity as taught us here  
Be every borne in mind,  
The Golden Rule our motto true,  
For days of Auld Lang Syne.<sup>8</sup>

The Chaplain, standing before the altar, prays:

<sup>5</sup>The Opening and Closing Ceremonies, and the Initiation ritual, quoted in this section are available online at: [www.stelling.nl/vrijmetselarij/bpoe\\_r.html](http://www.stelling.nl/vrijmetselarij/bpoe_r.html)

<sup>6</sup>*Ritual of the Subordinate Lodges Under the Jurisdiction of the Grand Lodge of the Benevolent and Protective Order of Elks of the United States of America*, 1990, 3, 5. Staff of the BPOE in 2004 informed the Commission's staff that little change, if any, has been made to this edition of the *Ritual*. The citations in the text below are from the printed (1990) edition, which coincide with the online version noted in note 4 above.

<sup>7</sup>*Ibid.*, 26.

<sup>8</sup> [www.stelling.nl/vrijmetselarij/bpoe\\_r.html](http://www.stelling.nl/vrijmetselarij/bpoe_r.html), 3.

Our Father Who art in Heaven, direct us in all our deliberations with Thy most gracious favor, and further us with Thy continued help, that in all our works begun, continued and ended in Thee, we may glorify Thy holy name. Enlighten our minds more and more with the principles of our Order—Charity, Justice, Brotherly Love and Fidelity. Let the light of Thy countenance shine upon us even as the light of this star. Increase in us true benevolence, nourish us with all goodness, keep us faithful to our obligation, and lead us and all Elks beside the still waters of peace, for Thine is the power and the glory forever and ever. Amen.<sup>9</sup>

The brief Closing Ceremony consists of an admonition not to reveal anything of a confidential nature, the return of the Bible, the Emblem and the Flag to their respective stations, the singing of “God Bless America” and a prayer, which reads:

Our Father, Who art in Heaven, we thank Thee for the fellowship and accomplishments of this hour. As we began our session in acknowledgement of Thee and Thy goodness and mercy, may we close by asking Thy benediction. May the principles of Charity, Justice, Brotherly Love and Fidelity guide us until we meet again. Amen.<sup>10</sup>

### *Rite of Initiation*

The Initiation Ceremony begins with the introduction of the candidate to the Exalted Ruler who informs him of the necessity “to take the solemn and binding Obligation of the Benevolent and Protective Order of Elks,” assuring him that nothing will conflict with his religious and political opinions. The candidate affirms his belief in God.<sup>11</sup> Following a specified prayer by the Chaplain, the candidate is placed in a position to assume the obligation with his left hand over his heart and his right hand lifted above the altar. The obligation is then administered, in which the candidate swears to keep matters of the Order confidential, support and obey the statutes, uphold the Constitution and laws of the United States, not use his membership for business or commercial purposes, etc. The initiate concludes his solemn obligation with these words:

If I break this Obligation, may I wander through the world forsaken; may I be pointed out as a being bereft of decency and manhood, unfit to hold communion with true and upright men. And may God help me, and keep me steadfast in this my solemn and binding Obligation in the Benevolent and Protective Order of Elks of the United States of America. Amen.<sup>12</sup>

“Nearer, My God, to Thee” is sung, and the candidate is instructed as to the significance of the hour of eleven o’clock (see below). The members present stretch forth their right hands signifying the renewal of their own obligations, while also reminding the candidate of the hand of fellowship and assistance offered to him by every Elk. However, the candidate is warned, “should you prove unfaithful, these same hands will be clenched to drive you from our midst and punish you for your infidelity.”<sup>13</sup> Instructions in the procedures of the Order follow,

<sup>9</sup>*Ibid.*, 28. The first sentence of this prayer is found in a collect or prayer for divine guidance and assistance in hymnals of many Christian denominations. However, omitted from this prayer are the concluding words of that collect in its Christian form, “and finally, by Thy mercy, obtain eternal life.” The Elks’ form seems to imply that Elks will be led to the still waters of peace because they have increased in true benevolence and have remained faithful to their obligation.

<sup>10</sup>*Ibid.*, 56.

<sup>11</sup>*Ibid.*, 34.

<sup>12</sup>*Ibid.*, 37.

<sup>13</sup>*Ibid.*, 38.

including the making of the “hailing sign.” The “foundation and groundwork” of the Order is revealed as “to do unto others as we would they should do unto us.”<sup>14</sup>

The rituals continue with a review of the cardinal tenets of the Order: Brotherly Love, Justice, Charity, and Fidelity. A legend about the gods on Olympus is used to teach that Charity is the greatest of all virtues. As a symbol of the patriotism fostered by the Order, a Flag is presented to the candidate. The recitation of the poem *Thanatopsis* at the conclusion of the initiation is optional.

At meetings and social functions of the BPOE, the “Eleven O’Clock Toast” (called a “Ceremonial”) “shall be” observed at 11:00 p.m. It is to be a reminder to all brothers that “Living or dead, an Elk is never forgotten, never forsaken.”<sup>15</sup> Some forms of the 11 O’Clock Toast speak of “absent Brothers” on “the other shore” [in heaven, “celestial home,” “eternity”] who toast back with “To our absent Brothers, ‘till we meet here,” implying some sort of reunion in the hereafter.<sup>16</sup>

### *Other Rituals*

The Lodge utilizes other rituals and ceremonies that include prayers and religious sentiments similar to those found in the principal rituals discussed above. We note, for example, the ceremony of Announcing the Death of a Brother, which is to be included in a regular Lodge meeting when appropriate. This announcement includes a prayer expressing confidence in God’s “redeeming grace and power.”<sup>17</sup> A vocalist or quartette sings one verse of “The Vacant Chair”:

We shall meet, but we shall miss him  
There will be the vacant chair,  
But though we no more possess him,  
Still our hearts his memory bear.  
But a while ago we gathered,  
Friendship beaming in each eye,  
Now the golden cord is severed,  
He has passed to realms on high.

Concerning the deceased, the Exalted Ruler announces: “He has passed into the light which is beyond the valley of the shadow of death.”<sup>18</sup>

Secondly, we may note the Ritual for Funeral Services<sup>19</sup> that has been used in the Elks Lodge. Though it is reported that this Ritual is falling into disuse in some lodges, the Ritual nevertheless reveals a philosophy consistent with other religious references in the main rituals of the Lodge. In the funeral ritual the Exalted Ruler says:

...And again we realize that in the midst of life we are in death; that He who watches over all our destinies has the spirits of the departed under His gentle

<sup>14</sup>*Ibid.*, 42.

<sup>15</sup>*Ibid.*, 15.

<sup>16</sup><http://www.elks.org/history/toastarchive.cfm>

<sup>17</sup>*Ritual*, 76.

<sup>18</sup>*Ibid.*, 77.

<sup>19</sup>In July 2005 the Commission’s staff requested from the BPOE headquarters copies of any editions of this Ritual more recent than the 1990 edition, which the Commission’s office possesses. No response was received from the Elks.

care, and on the last great day will again united the chain of Fraternal love so recently broken.<sup>20</sup>

The ritual for the graveside service includes a prescribed prayer by the Chaplain which contains this concluding sentence: “Bless us in the benevolent and protective work of our Order, and so direct us in observing and advancing the principles upon which our fraternity is founded, that we may ever merit Thy blessings and approval.”<sup>21</sup> In his concluding remarks at the graveside, the Exalted Ruler says concerning the departed brother: “May thy memory inspire us to deeds of charity, helpfulness, and love for our fellowmen, and may we meet again in an eternity of bliss.”<sup>22</sup>

Finally, we may call attention to the commemoration of departed brothers required for every Elks’ Lodge on the first Sunday in December. The ritual of the specified Memorial Service emphasizes the promise of eternal life to all departed Elks. The Chaplain’s opening prayer includes these words:

...we meet to honor the memory of our brothers whom Thou has summoned to lay down the burdens of mortality, and to find rest with Thee....Imbue our hearts with the inspiring hope of immortality that banishes sorrow and gives assurance of a happy reunion upon the shores of Thy fair land.<sup>23</sup>

The Exalted Ruler announces:

As Elks we are taught that some day the mortal shall put on immortality. Firm in our faith, we are reminded by these services that we are born, not to die, but to live. True, the light of beloved eyes has faded from our sight, but it shines more brightly on another shore. Voices we loved to hear at the fireside, in the marts of trade, or in fraternal association, are silenced; but they will live again in the music of the Choir Invisible, and blend forever in the harmony of angels. Memorial Day with us is a day of tender sentiment. Hope dries our tears, and with eyes of faith we may see those whom we loved and lost awhile, faring on through a better land, awaiting the day when the chain of fraternal love shall be re-united forevermore.<sup>24</sup>

Preceding the Oration the Exalted Ruler says: “And may the Grace of the Grand Exalted Ruler of all enable us to derive from this ceremony renewed confidence that beyond the shadows there is life everlasting.”<sup>25</sup>

### **Evaluation from a Lutheran Theological Perspective**

The Lutheran Church—Missouri Synod recognizes with appreciation the significant contributions made by the Benevolent and Protective Order of Elks to the common good in our society and nation. Through its institutions and programs the Elks’ Lodge has had a commendable history of providing support and encouragement not only for the members of the fraternity and their families, but also for the citizens of our nation in times of crisis and need.

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<sup>20</sup> *Rituals of Special Services*, Benevolent and Protective Order of Elks of the United States of America, January 1964 revised edition, 23.

<sup>21</sup> *Ibid.*, 26.

<sup>22</sup> *Ibid.*, 27.

<sup>23</sup> *Ibid.*, 34.

<sup>24</sup> *Ibid.*, 34-35.

<sup>25</sup> *Ibid.*, 36.

We appreciate the Lodge's desire to avoid introducing anything into the Order that is "of a political or sectarian character," and its efforts to assure its members that there would be nothing in their membership obligations that would conflict with an individual's religious convictions. Unfortunately, however, the many overtly religious elements that permeate the official rites and rituals of the Lodge reveal a religious perspective that in our judgment conflicts with the biblical teaching on key spiritual truths, and that, in fact, is contrary to the scriptural Gospel of Jesus Christ.

The ceremonies reviewed above speak, and without discrimination, of the entry of all Elks upon death into an eternal fellowship in the presence of God. The ceremonies suggest that an unspecified "belief in God" and adherence to the principles of the Order (Charity, Justice, Brotherly Love and Fidelity) are instrumental for the attainment of eternal peace in heaven and reunion with other Elks. However, the heart of the biblical Gospel is that eternal life is given by God only to those who confess and believe in Jesus Christ, the Son of God and the only Savior of the world (Rom. 10:9-10; Acts 4:12). As St. Paul states with unparalleled clarity, "For there is no distinction: for all have sinned and fall short of the glory of God, and are justified by his grace as a gift, through the redemption that is in Christ Jesus, whom God put forward as a propitiation by his blood, to be received by faith...for we hold that one is justified by faith apart from the works of the law" (Rom.3:22-25, 28). As Jesus Himself said, "I am the way, and the truth, and the life. *No one* comes to the Father except through me" (emphasis added; John 14:6). Good works indeed are necessary in the Christian's life, but as the fruit of a living faith in Christ—and not as a contributing factor in a person's salvation (Gal. 2:16; 5:22-23).

The Elks' ritual speaks of God's "redeeming grace," but nowhere is the revelation of God's redeeming grace in Jesus Christ even mentioned. One can understand why the Lodge's rituals would omit any reference to Jesus Christ, lest in its view "sectarian" views be introduced and its universalist or religiously all-inclusive perspective be compromised. But to introduce the hope of eternal life, either implicitly or explicitly, without mention of the Savior is itself sectarian—and in a way that is patently offensive to confessing Christians. Moreover, from a Lutheran perspective, for the Bible to occupy such a central emblematic role in the Lodge's rituals and in a religious context, without even the slightest acknowledgement of its central purpose (2 Tim. 3:15; Rom. 15:4ff.), indeed turns the Holy Scriptures into a "book of Law" and thus a book without hope.

In offering this perspective we are mindful of our Lord's admonition, "So everyone who acknowledges me before men, I also will acknowledge before my Father who is in heaven, but whoever denies me before men, I also will deny before my Father who is in heaven" (Matt. 10:32-33). It is out of a sincere pastoral concern for the spiritual well-being of those for whom Christ died that we present the above evaluation. Public commitment, in the words of a solemn oath, to tenets that compromise a Christian's witness to the truth of the Gospel is always a matter of serious spiritual import and cannot, in our view, be taken lightly.