



Unions

Quite some time ago someone asked me to write something about membership in trade unions. She wondered whether membership in a union was compatible with membership in the Church of Christ. This is a worthwhile question. As you young people look for jobs and prepare for professions, the need for a decision to join or not to join a union will confront you.

To make a blanket statement that all unions are evil and that we may not join any is saying too much. Blanket statements are easy to make; however, they are often not based on any definite criteria.

To decide if you may join a specific union, you must read through the union's constitution and the collective agreement between the union and the employer. You must determine what members of that union bind themselves to. If, by joining that union, you would place yourself under a yoke which would replace the yoke of Jesus Christ, you may not join that union. *"For freedom Christ has set us free; stand fast therefore, and do not submit again to a yoke of slavery"* (Galatians 5:1). You will find, in almost every case that joining a union would place you under an ungodly yoke.

Objections

Most unions require unqualified obedience of their members. Their constitutions will say something like:

Members of Local Unions shall conform to and abide by the Constitution, Laws, Rules, Obligation and Ritual, and the decisions, rulings, orders and directions of any authority of the International Union empowered by this Constitution to make them.

(Constitution, International Union of Operating Engineers, Art. XXIV, 3a)

The union has the power to discipline members who do not obey:

Any member...who refuses to acknowledge or perform the lawful command of those authorized within the International Union to issue the same, may be disciplined or, upon trial therefore and conviction thereof, be fined, suspended or expelled from his Local Union.

(Constitution, Art. XXIV, 7e)

These articles demand unconditional submission to decisions, rulings, commands, etc., made in the past or *yet to be made in the future*. The Word of God prohibits us from binding ourselves or allowing ourselves to be bound to anything which now already or in the future may conflict with our commitment to God and His Word.

"We must obey God rather than men."

(Acts 5:29)

"No one can serve two masters; for either he will hate the one and love the other, or he will be devoted to the one and despise the other. You cannot serve God and mammon."

(Matthew 6:24)

We may not bind ourselves to two (possibly) conflicting masters. We should also remember what the Lord Jesus said in Matthew 10:37-38:

"He who loves father or mother more than Me is not worthy of Me; and he who loves son or daughter more than Me is not worthy of Me; and he who does not take his cross and follow Me is not worthy of Me."

The first problem with union membership is this demand of unconditional obedience. The unions do not say: "Whatever we decree shall be considered settled and binding, unless it is proved to be in conflict with the Word of God." Rather, they say: "Whatever we decree shall be considered settled and binding," period.

The second problem has to do with the adversarial model used in negotiations with the employer. Strike action is a foundation pillar of the union movement. Strikes, work stoppage, "work to rule," even the securing of a strike of all such other trades and workmen as can be obtained, are all used in order to resolve grievances or disputes with employers. A union member will be put under discipline if he works contrary to a declared strike:

Any member working contrary to a declared strike ... shall, upon trial and conviction thereof, be subject to a fine of not less than Twenty-five (\$25.00) Dollars, or expulsion, or both.

(Constitution, Art. XXIV, 7e)

This adversarial model of grievance and dispute resolution is anti-biblical. The Bible teaches a harmony model:

Slaves, be obedient to those who are your earthly masters, with fear and trembling, in singleness of heart, as to Christ; not in the way of eye service, as men-pleasers, but as servants of Christ, doing the will of God from the heart, rendering service with a good will as to the Lord and not to men, knowing that whatever good any one does, he will receive the same again from the Lord, whether he is a slave or free. Masters, do the same to them, and forbear threatening, knowing that He who is both their Master and yours is in heaven, and that there is no partiality with Him.

(Ephesians 6:5-9)

It can happen that the employer becomes an "enemy" of the employees by the way he treats them; however, that the employer does not subscribe to the biblical harmony model does not allow us to subscribe to an adversarial model. In fact, the Bible teaches:

"Do not resist one who is evil. But if any one strikes you on the right cheek, turn to him the other also. . . . Love your enemies and pray for those who persecute you."

(Matthew 5:39 & 44)

These two reasons alone make membership in almost every union unacceptable.¹ What are you to do when confronted with having to choose whether or not to join a specific union? Perhaps the job you want requires union membership. It's a "closed shop."

Your options

You have three options. The first is, compromise your Christian convictions and join the union. Not only is this unacceptable. It is very dangerous.

Your second option is to forget about that trade or profession and go look somewhere else. You may need to do this, but do not do it too quickly. The "closed shop" philosophy is morally reprehensible. By demanding that the job or profession be closed to nonunion members (usually called "union security" in the collective agreements) the union is stealing from you. If the Lord has given you gifts and talents for a specific profession or trade and the union does not allow you to employ them unless you join it, the union is stealing from you. It is stealing your rightful place under the sun to work as God's image upon the earth. It is stealing your livelihood - your way to support the ministry of the gospel, the needy, yourself and your family.

You have a third option. You can seek an exemption from membership in the union and from supporting it financially by way of union dues. The provincial labor codes of the four Western provinces and of Ontario each contain an article which allows for such exemptions. The federal code provides an exemption for employees working under federal jurisdiction. (Unless matters have changed recently, Quebec and the Atlantic provinces do not allow exemptions. I do not know what the laws in Australia or the USA call for.) The exemption will be granted if you can show that you have sincerely held religious beliefs and convictions which prevent you from being a member

of a trade union. A supporting letter from your pastor may be helpful. If it refuses, which, being zealous, it is sure to do, you can appeal to the provincial labor relations board.

The rules are different in the various provinces. In Alberta, the board is primarily interested in the personal beliefs of the individual while in British Columbia and Manitoba the board needs also to be convinced that the church officially teaches against union membership.

When the exemption is granted, you and the union will need to decide upon a mutually acceptable charitable organization to which an amount equal to the initiation fees and union dues will be directed, such as the Red Cross or the Cancer Society. Unfortunately, the Canadian Reformed World Relief Fund will surely not qualify.

Seeking an exemption is an honorable option. It will give you a good opportunity to confess the Name of Jesus Christ before men and seek to obtain employment for which you are qualified and to which you have a right.

Perhaps the thought of going before a secular panel and speaking about your beliefs and convictions makes you nervous. That is understandable. However, do not forget that when you have the truth on your side, you are strong. With the right Man, Jesus Christ, on your side, no one can do anything to you. You can do all things through Him who strengthens you. Remember your Creator. Honour Him. He will honour you.

GP Van Popta

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¹ There are other reasons. Read W. Pouwelse, "Organized Labour," *A Spiritual House*, Winnipeg: Premier, 1986.