

Divine Calling and Human Rank: The Locus of Authority for Military Chaplains

Render unto Caesar the things that are Caesar's, and to God the things that are God's.

Matthew 22:21



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Fed Pract. 2026;43(5).
Published online May 15.
doi:10.12788/fp.0733

While in my 20s, I taught religious education at a church on the Army base where I was born and had the honor of working with military chaplains. During my US Department of Veterans Affairs career, I closely collaborated with chaplains—many of whom were veterans—on patient care and ethics consultations. Some were quite proud of their rank and interested in climbing the ladder of promotion. A few made sure you knew what they wore or had worn on their uniform, while most were incredibly humble and sheepish when soldiers saluted them. Those visible responses to rank may be hidden if chaplains will no longer be permitted to wear insignia indicating their grade.

Department of War Secretary Peter Hegseth, a combat veteran who has championed a “combative” form of Christianity, announced in April 2026 that chaplains would no longer wear their rank on their uniform.¹ Details of how this shift will be translated into regulation, policy, and actions were not provided. Secretary Hegseth did not remove the actual rank of members of the chaplain corps and they would retain their rank, attendant pay, benefits, responsibilities, and privileges. However, instead of bearing the insignia of their military station, under this new policy only the symbol of their religious profession would identify them. Currently, both a military officer’s rank and religious symbol are displayed.²

Useful insight can be gained from an historical perspective, which demonstrates that the concerns and contention about the issue of chaplain’s wearing rank are not new. There have been chaplains in the US Army since 1775.³ Army chaplains initially wore only a religious symbol on their clothing. In April 1914, chaplain leaders successfully argued that chaplains deserved the privileges, respect, and prospect for promotion that rank symbolized and where authorized to display their position. Four years later, General Jack Pershing cabled

the then Secretary of War opposing the new policy: “Believe the work of chaplains would be facilitated if they were not given military rank ... Many of our principal ministers believe that their relations would be closer if they did not have military titles and did not wear insignia.”⁴ Interestingly, Secretary Hegseth articulated the same concern: “A chaplain is first and foremost a chaplain and an officer second. This change is a visual representation of that fact.”⁵

Hegseth has stated that in recent years the military chaplain corps had drifted too far in the direction of providing spiritual counseling and psychological support. This contravenes the current competencies especially for company-grade military chaplains who primarily minister to the moral distress and spiritual needs of service members.⁴ The removal of rank is thus best understood as part of Secretary Hegseth’s broader plan to remake the chaplain corps into his vision of religious ministry in the military.⁵

Secretary Hegseth proffered several arguments for the necessity of removing rank in part to reorient the chaplain corps to what he calls a more fundamental mission. The first was theological: chaplains need to prioritize their “divine calling” rather than any human distinction. Chaplain theologians and ethicists have expressed similar concerns that in wearing rank, military chaplains become servants of the state and not of God. Adam Tietje articulates the corruptive influence this shift in the source of legitimacy has on the military chaplain’s spiritual mission:

This undermines the ability of chaplains to provide care and counsel to both soldiers and leaders that is not muddied with the interests of the military. Chaplains without rank are better positioned to hear and advocate for their soldier’s matters of conscience as well as bear witness to the moral claims of their respective religious communities especially about war itself.³

The second argument is pastoral. Hegseth contends that service members of lower rank would feel more comfortable and secure approaching chaplains with no outward sign of their higher position. Chaplain interactions with military personnel carry a degree of confidentiality higher than that of either doctors or lawyers. Chaplains, as they were in the past, remain divided on this important consideration.^{4,5}

The third argument is ethical in nature. Secretary Hegseth contends that excluding any manifestation of military rank, “speaks to the difficult balance of the duality” of the role.⁶ It seems he is proposing that chaplains displaying only the image of their faith commitment symbolically resolves the inherent moral conflict between serving human masters as a military officer, and the divine as a minister.⁷ Military chaplains and health care professionals are all too familiar with the dilemma of having 2 masters and the challenge of negotiating legally and ethically overlapping roles.⁸⁻¹⁰

This may seem to some like a minor change in chaplain etiquette to some, but to others it signals a significant ethical and political change with potential import beyond chaplaincy. One military commentator has suggested the move sets a dangerous precedent that could eventually be applied to both health care professionals and the judge advocate corps.¹¹ At this point this is only speculation and its slippery slope arguments are logically suspect without evidence. Yet at least 1 study suggests that the influence of military physician’s rank on patient care may lead to inequities in the care delivered to patients with lower grade.¹²

It is commanders who are the decision-makers in the military. Chaplains who are field grade officers serve as trusted staff advisors in moral, ethical, and spiritual matters.⁴ Some chaplains fear that without rank leaders at all levels will not have adequate trust and sufficient respect to heed their crucial counsel especially regarding high-stakes strategic decisions in wartime.⁸ The more serious concern is with a major shift in the locus of authority to determine the professional identity of chaplains, that could in theory be expanded to impact military health care

practitioners, and attorneys. The independent expert judgment of these professionals regarding what is necessary to fulfil their respective roles in providing spiritual ministry, medical care, and legal is critical to uphold the highest values of the US military.¹¹ Chaplains have long struggled with what they owe to the Caesar and to God: how the Secretary’s recent decision will shape that rendering is uncertain. What is certain is that military chaplains of all faiths and in every branch of the armed services will continue to minister to their brothers and sisters in arms with courage and compassion.

Disclaimer

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