

VICTORIA LODGE OF EDUCATION AND RESEARCH  
650 Fisgard Street, Victoria, B.C. V8W 1R6

The following paper was presented at the 41st Annual Inter-Provincial Conference of the officers of the four Western Masonic Jurisdictions Held at Banff, Alberta September 3rd, 4th, 5th, 1981 (From the Proceedings)  
Printed for Distribution - February, 1982

**"WHAT DOES IT MEAN TO BE A MASON?"**

by

R.W. Bro. Franklin Rogers, S.G.W., G.R.A.  
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In preparing this paper I chose several topics and discarded them for various reasons. Finally, after much consideration I decided to present to you some thoughts concerning the question "WHAT DOES IT MEAN TO BE A MASON?" Let me begin by saying that my ideas are by no means original, I have no new insights and I do not presume to instruct or enlighten this learned body of Masonic brethren. It is not for me to attempt to teach you the aims and objects of FREEMASONRY. Anything I may say has been said many times before by men who were much more knowledgeable than I, but some truths, even though self-evident bear repeating over and over and we can stand to be reminded. Some questions need to be brought to our attention many times and some issues call for constant re-evaluation.

Let us then, consider the question. To answer quickly perhaps the first thing that comes to mind is that it is to be a part of a group of men, a brotherhood guided by a set of principles. The answers however, could be as many and as varied as there are Masons through-out the world. "No two human beings have made or ever will make exactly the same journey in life. Each different brain has to deal with a different tide of experience". The marvel then, in view of all this is not that men should disagree with one another but that so many should reach such a large measure of agreement. Some might define Masonry as a "state of mind in which our thinking is positive and pleasant a good share of the time". (Our ritual teaches us to be happy ourselves and to communicate that happiness to others.) Let us agree then that Masonry is a state of mind and that there is no sure fire formula to achieve that state; still there must be a common denominator and this I hope we can arrive at as we consider this question. I would like every Mason present to ask himself, "How do I know myself to be a Mason?"; by being often tried, never denied and ready to be tried again". Let us try and understand the true meaning of this question and have the courage to try and live the answer.

I have chosen to explore the significance of what it means to be a Mason using "The Ten Commandments of a Mason" by John R. Nacas P.M. California Research Lodge.

1. Believe in God
2. Practice Brotherly Love
3. Relieve the Distressed
4. Search for truth
5. Be an exemplary citizen
6. Be pure in Life and Conduct
7. Be Temperate
8. Be courageous
9. Be Prudent

## 10. Be Just

### 1.

#### 1. Believe in God

As Masons our belief in God goes without saying in that it is the first requirement for membership. "Freemasonry has just one dogma. It asks just one thing of every man and that is Believe in God." Belief in God is an unchangeable landmark and without it, Masonry as we have always known could not be Masonry. The question I raise is "Is it enough just to have a simple belief or should there be greater depths?" To my way of thinking "Belief in God" is inherent in the nature of man. Even primitive peoples believed in a power beyond themselves, actually it is easier, I think, to believe in God than to disbelieve. Many of the most evil men believe in the existence of God. Even professed Atheists when confronted with a situation of stress or danger will turn unconsciously to God in prayer. How do we as Masons, stand above and beyond this basic belief and how does it affect us? Speaking personally, my belief in God does not depend on my being a Mason, it is part of my heritage, yet each strengthens and enriches the other.

Let us look then for a moment at a Mason's faith. It is founded on the word of God, the fellowship of our Brethren and the desire to do right by all men. Our Grand Lodge Constitution tells us that Masons, of all men, should best understand that God seeth, not as man seeth for man looketh at the outward appearance but God looketh to the heart. A Mason is therefore particularly bound never to act against the dictates of his conscience. The Fraternity unites men of many countries, sects and opinions. It is a Fellowship and a Philosophy that translates its principles into terms of daily living. It challenges its members to the highest reaches of noble living when rightly understood.

Belief in God is faith, belief about God is theology. When Freemasonry accepts a Christian, a Jew, a Buddhist or Mohomedan, it does not accept him as such, but as a man, worthy to be received into the Order.

#### 2. Practice Brotherly Love.

Let me begin by asking for a definition : "Brotherly Love." One of the great principles and chief aims of our craft is Brotherhood. As we read in the first verse of Psalm 133, "Behold how good and pleasant it is for brethren to dwell together in unity." However, I ask you, who do we mean when we say "my brother." Does brotherly love extend beyond sons of the same father or our fellow Lodge brethren? Should our aim and task be to promote the Brotherhood of Man under the Fatherhood of God? It is fairly easy to love those who love us in return, who think and live as we do but not so easy in terms of the unloving and unloveable. We must learn to live, love, and get along with our fellowman if we hope to make this world a better place to live.

Brotherly love must go beyond the doors of our Lodge rooms into our everyday lives. In the words of the English poet John Donne:

"No man is an island unto himself,  
None lives his life alone  
All that we send forth into the lives of others  
Comes back into our own."

For the Mason, the term "Brotherhood" is founded upon and included every great quality of man. Brotherhood is compassion; it is the need to serve, it is each of the great social virtues, fraternity and equality. Brotherhood extends the hand of true charity. Brotherhood believes that justice will yet reign. Brotherhood casts out, as unworthy of man all fear, hatred and unkindness and

calls upon each Mason to join men of goodwill everywhere to say with them, "We believe in Man." To quote that great poet, Robert Burns who was himself a Mason:

"Then let us pray, that come it may,  
As come it will, for A' that --  
That man to man the world o'er  
Shall brothers be, for A' that.

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3. Relieve the Distressed.

Here we consider the second great Masonic principle of "Relief." Masons have been accused of being self-centred and inward looking only, that we are not concerned with outreach. It is admitted that we look after our own, which fact bears some merit but that this falls far short of true Christian Charity.

Waltan Hannah in his book, "Darkness Visible" makes several connections to which I think you might take exception. He says and I quote "Undoubtedly the greatest attraction of Freemasonry to most of its adherents is NOT its ritual or religious implications, not its supposed advantages in business and certain professions, but the warm fellowship of sincere and genuine friendliness and brotherhood at Lodge meetings and after proceedings, for Masons admit frankly that they exist for the entirely laudable purpose of material enjoyment and mutual benefit", end of quote. He admits that we have Benevolent funds for the benefit of distressed Masons, their widows and orphans. He calls these "closed shop charities" and claims they are equaled by insurance funds and fringe benefits offered by most companies and trade unions. He contends that Masons boast openly about their charity but that they come mainly from a fairly well off segment of society and can well afford to pay for their privileges. To quote once more "when every allowance is made, Masonic benevolence is not to be identified with the ideal of Christian Charity. It is not the spirit of the widow casting in her mite but of rich men (styling themselves as sons of the widow) giving of their superfluity. The Masonic ritual warns AGAINST this ideal of Christian Charity. The third degree obligation pledges the candidate to relieve a brother Mason in need only "so far as may fairly be done without detriment to myself or my connections", end of quote. Whether Mr. Hannah is right or not in his allegations it gives us food for thought.

To turn to a more positive point of view concerning Masonic Charity, one of the things that we may tell a non-Mason regarding Masonry is that we believe that we owe to all those that are less fortunate than we, a duty of charitable relief - not merely monetary, or physical relief, but such encouragement, moral advice, and assistance as we are capable of giving them. This does not sound entirely self-centred to me. I also refer to a paper given by our own M.W. Brother Dr. Collett.

"What then is the obligation of Masons as they go forth into the world from their lodges strengthened by the teachings of Free-masonry? The great American judge, Oliver Wendell Holmes, when nearing the end of a long life of service, summed up the obligation of every man in these words: 'It is required of us that we take part in the affairs of our time lest, at the end, we be judged not to have lived.'"

For the Mason, objectives of Manhood within the Lodge become objectives of service outside its walls. Objectives of service become in Masonic terms, Brotherhood, Charity, Relief - all of the virtues which lie at the end of our Masonic pilgrimage. One Mason may, in the diversity of men who are Freemasons perceive the need for different actions than another; his goals may be

different; in the world of competing sorrows, he has different priorities than does his brother. But for each it is required of him that he take part in the affairs of his time lest, at the end, he be judged not to have lived. (His sense of the brotherhood of Man makes service a duty). To put it another way "Service is the rent we pay for the space we occupy".

#### 4. Search for Truth.

Brotherly Love, Relief and Truth - and the greatest of these is Truth, "Whatsoever things are true, whatsoever things are honest, Whatsoever things are just, whatsoever things are pure, whatsoever things are lovely, whatsoever things are of good report; if there be any virtue and if there be any praise, think on these things." (Philippians 4-8).

The last but not the least of the three grand principles is Truth. What, we may ask, is its relevance to Freemasonry? As Freemasons we should constantly aim to stand firm for truth in all

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circumstances: an ideal which as individuals we might sometimes find difficult to achieve. But one of the Craft's great contributions to the life of this country, or of wherever it is practised, is its influence in shaping the characters of the men who join it.

Light is often spoken of in close association with truth, indeed they are often considered synonymous. When the mind of man is in possession of the truth, we say the mind is illumined by truth. The darkness of ignorance is driven out, the clouds of prejudice are swept away, the blackness of resent, self-pity and hate is swept aside. His mind, illumined by truth, a man is able "to see life clearly and to see it whole."

The search for "Truth in Freemasonry" is the search for "the Word". In reality it is not a search for a Word at all, but a search for the Light that shineth from above. "For in the beginning was the Word and the Word was with God." No one knows exactly what truth is, but it is what we search for, a divine attribute and the foundation of every virtue.

The Bible, which occupies the most prominent position in the Lodge room - on the altar - is honored by Masons as the most valuable of all books for the light it casts on life's apparent enigmas. Masons believe that no book has proved more helpful in enabling men to rise above the vicissitudes of fortune and to nurture and exercise life's finest qualities.

In instructions to the candidate after he takes his first obligation at the Altar we read from the book of Genesis, "In the beginning, God created the Heaven and the earth. And the earth was without form and void and darkness was upon the face of the deep. And the Spirit of God moved upon the face of the waters: And God said 'Let there be light.' And there was light." Let us consider the three emblematic lights of Freemasonry: the volume of the Sacred Law, the Square and the Compasses, these three will illuminate our pathway as we search for Truth.

#### 5. & 6. "Be an Exemplary Citizen" Be Pure in Life & Conduct.

I have placed no.'s five and six together because I think they go hand in hand. We cannot have one without the other. Either one of course is an ideal state and one to which we can only aspire. The first step as we strive toward this ideal is, I believe to ask for guidance each day in thought, word and deed and to carefully govern our conduct in all matters. As I said, we can only

strive to accomplish this but to quote Bro. Orisan Marden in the Iowa Grand Lodge Bulletin "Hungering and striving after knowledge is what makes a scholar. Hungering and striving after virtue is what makes a saint. Hungering and striving after noble action is what makes a hero and a man.

Masonry seeks to develop tolerance and helpfulness -, to build character by urging men to curb passions, to nurture their purest aspirations; and to cultivate the finest moral qualities. It teaches opposition to all sinister projects or forces and support of that which promises enrichment of life.

Our lodges however are not schools of reform - nor are they necessary to change a man's way of life, for every man seeking the Great Light of Masonry must be a just and upright man prior to his acceptance into the Craft.

#### 7 Be Temperate

Pendant to the four corners of the Lodge are the four tassels representing the four cardinal virtues, namely, Temperance, Fortitude, Prudence and Justice. Now I ask, what is your definition of Temperance? Many think that if they control their physical appetite's for food and drink that they are a temperate person but must we not also, every day in our ordinary living learn to control our instincts and desires and practice strict self control?

#### 4.

##### Be Courageous.

The second cardinal virtue is fortitude and how this world needs men of real courage and fortitude today. By courage we do not mean just Superman, flying through the air to the rescue or St. George slaying the dragon but moral courage as well. A good shot of adrenaline into the system can give a man physical courage but it takes much more for moral courage, the courage to stand up for what you believe, the fortitude to stand pain and misfortune, to bend but not to break and as a Mason, the courage to stand behind our Masonic principles. Past Grand Master, the late Brother Carl Heckbert in an editorial in the bulletin sums it up much better than any words of mine.

"There are two great spiritual forces at war in the world today. The first is the spirit of good, the Divine influence which inspires unselfishness, kindness, tolerance, charity in all its manifestations and also that which gives men courage to face up to evil in any form. In our parlance it is the spirit of Brotherly Love, Relief and the genuine search after Truth. It is the Holy Spirit of God.

The second great power is the spirit of evil, that spirit which engenders hate, suspicion, greed, self-indulgence, mental and physical cruelty of every sort, and is at the root of the racial, religious and class intolerance so rife in the world today.

It is the spirit which has been at war with God since the beginning of time.

Brethren it is important that we, as Masons be not afraid to stand up and be counted in every area in which this battle is on."

#### 9. Be Prudent.

Prudence - the third cardinal virtue - this word according to Webster has many meanings and takes in a lot of territory. To be prudent is to be farsighted, wise, shrewd, circumspect, discreet, reasonable, frugal and I could

go on but what significance does it have regarding us as Masons? I leave it to you to decide if one specific definition applies or if the word embraces all? Could we perhaps for a moment take one meaning and look at it.

"Discretion" - cautious reserve in speech. I feel we have some food for thought here. Perhaps more people have been hurt through careless words, than in any other way; words spoken in anger and thoughtlessness but once spoken which can never be reclaimed. How hard it is sometimes to watch carefully what we say. The book of James Chapter 3 verses 7-9 has this to say: "Man is able to tame and has tamed all other creatures - wild animals and birds, reptiles and fish, but no man has ever been able to tame the tongue. It is evil and uncontrollable full of deadly poison. We use it to give Thanks to our Lord and Father and also to curse our fellow men created in the likeness of God".

The major lesson of the North East corner is Charity. That is a sadly degraded word nowadays but it means more than a penny in a bowl surely. It means kindness and tolerance in thought, WORD and deed.

#### 10. Be Just.

We come now to the fourth cardinal virtue and perhaps the most important of all - Justice. What a fine sound the word has, but it seems that is all it is, just a word. Man's inhumanity to man is just as evident today as it was at the beginning of time. We may well ask ourselves why this should be, and who will answer? In Micah Chapter 6 - verse 8 we read "He hath shewed thee, O man what is good and what hath the Lord require of thee, but to do justly, and to love mercy and to walk humbly with thy God."

Our present Prime Minister when first elected pledged himself to bring about a just society in Canada. We still have a long way to go, is it perhaps a vain dream? Certainly, a just society can never be established through politics alone. What can we as Masons do to help bring this about? Perhaps the first

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step is to take a positive attitude. Most of us today have a pretty negative and pessimistic view toward world peace, injustice and human rights. We feel helpless. No one will deny the serious threats that exist. Scientists tell us flow that the hands of the Doomsday clock are only a few minutes (figuratively speaking) to mid-night, that being the zero hour for a nuclear holocaust. Some men prophesy that the Battle of Armageddon is to take place in this decade, not a cheerful prospect is it? It has been said however and I firmly believe that all that is necessary for evil to triumph is for good men to do nothing. This should remind us that we dare not sit back complacently but each individual must take action.

If we look back we can see that the world has always been in turmoil. On the positive side however, we have come a long way in Human Rights in the Western World in the last one hundred years. We no longer have debtors prisons or work houses Unions have worked toward and have been highly successful in securing better conditions for working people. These things of course are just a drop in the Bucket when you consider the injustice and misery that exists throughout the world, but there is only one place to start and that is where we stand right now, so what positive action can we as Masons take, to bring about that Brotherhood of man under the Fatherhood of God, of which we speak.

#### C. Closing

In closing I ask each of you once again "What does it mean to be a Mason? It has been said that one cannot be a Christian in seclusion; we can only be a

Christian when we come to grips with the world we live in". I ask you "Can the same be said of Masonry".

We, as Masons here today are privileged in many ways. Should the good gifts which God has bestowed upon us of freedom, physical comforts, intellect and a fair share of worldly goods be used only for our own benefit and enjoyment or for the good of all mankind? Yes, we are privileged but with privileges come responsibilities and the greater the privilege the greater the responsibility.

Should being a Mason imbue us with a greater sense of responsibility regarding our duties to not only our Masonic brethren but to our fellow men, our brothers throughout the world.

I would like to sum it all up by reading this little piece from Joseph Fort Newton.

"When is a Man a Mason?"

When is a man a Mason? When he can look out over the rivers, the hills and the far horizon with a profound sense of his own littleness in the vast scheme of things, and yet have faith, hope and courage. When he knows that down in his heart every man is a noble, as vile, as diabolic, and as lonely as himself, and seeks to know, to forgive and to love his fellow man. When he knows how to sympathize with men in their sorrows, yea even in their sins - knowing that each man fights a hard fight against many odds. When he has learned how to make friends and keep them, and above all, how to keep friends with himself. When he loves flowers, can hunt birds without a gun, and feels the thrill of an old forgotten joy when he hears the laugh of a little child. When he can be happy and high-minded amid the meaner drudgeries of life. When star-crowned trees and the glint of sunlight on flowing waters subdue him like the thought of one much loved and long dead. When no voice of distress reaches his ears in vain, and no hand seeks aid without response. When he finds faith in every good that helps any life, whatever the name of that faith may be. When he can look into a wayside puddle and see something besides mud, and into the face of the most forlorn mortal and see something beyond sin. When he knows how to pray, how to love, how to hope. When he has kept faith with himself, with his fellow man, with his God; in his hand a sword for evil, in his heart a bit of a song - glad to live, but not afraid to die! In such a man, whether he be rich or poor, scholarly or unlearned, famous or obscure. Masonry has wrought her sweet ministry! Such a man has found the only real secret of Masonry, and the one which it is trying to give to the world.