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Grand Lodge Bulletin

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WHAT IS FREEMASONRY?

A Leading Paper Delivered at the Western Masonic Conference,
Banff, Alberta

BY

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In defining itself as a system of morality veiled in allegory Freemasonry takes itself seriously. There are no side issues involved as to benevolent aims or social objects. These, or other desirable methods of expression, are left to grow out of the more comprehensive definition quoted.

To the profane who has never been within the walls of a Lodge room Freemasonry is the aristocrat among secret societies. To him the appeal may be curiosity, admiration for its benevolent practices, or a desire for social fellowship. I do not know of a man joining the Masonic Order because he understood it to be a system of morality, or because there was an intellectual appeal in its philosophy and symbology. It seems a pity that this appeal cannot be made more manifest to the outside world, but no one can receive knowledge for which he is not prepared. In the practical working out of our Freemasonry the keynote cannot always be pitched on the high levels of philosophical exposition, but too often the degrees are conferred without the emphasis on instruction, hence the odious term "degree mill" is deservedly applicable. Freemasons are made, not elected. Freemasonry is not a benevolent society, that is, the primary aim is not benevolence, but being a system of morality the virtue of charity is one of its prominent teachings and a front rank place must be accorded benevolent practice and charitable conduct. Individual Freemasons, or Lodges, or even Grand Lodges, should not delude themselves with the idea that they are functioning to the fullest degree by the practice of their one virtue.

Neither is Freemasonry a social order. It is not a club for the enjoyment of social intercourse alone. Man is gregarious in his instincts, and these instincts ought to be given expression. But here again the social side of Freemasonry ought to be subordinated to the main theme. Just as in the harmony of music there are many parts, the undue emphasis of any one of these will cause discord.

Many Freemasons profess to find in Freemasonry a religion. Morality is a very good soil out of which spirituality may grow, but morality and spirituality are different elements of character. FREEMASONRY HAS NO SOLUTION FOR THE PROBLEM OF MAN'S ATTITUDE TO DEITY. The recognition of the Fatherhood of God is only partial in its answer. It has no solution for the problem of pain, sorrow and evil in the world, neither has it a solution for the problem of hereafter. It does not seek to make bad men good, unless, of course, they are Freemasons. In short, it does not function as a religious experience. It is all very well for the young man in whom abounding physical well-being may obscure spiritual promptings for a time, to say out of his lack of life's experience that Freemasonry is a good enough religion for him; but as he grows older and tastes some of the bitter experiences that life holds for all of us, sooner or later he will realize that Freemasonry is not a complete answer to the riddle of existence.

What is Freemasonry? . . . and again we return to its own answer . . . a system of morality veiled in allegory. But this simple statement is provocative of further questioning. It is simply a re-statement of the simple moral truths we all learned from our parents, from our Sunday School teachers, or from the Minister in the pulpit. Or is there, in the profundities of its symbology an intellectual appeal that must be sought through serious study. Many Masonic students have found in it just such an appeal. What is Freemasonry? —A system of sublime truths, including those of the natural universe, as well as of moral and intellectual science and philosophy, based on the accepted fact of one Almighty, infinite, and perfect Deity, called by Freemasons T. G. A. of U.—the perfection and completeness of the order of the universe, its correspondence with itself throughout; that is, in all its parts and degrees —the co-ordination of these last by correspondence with the degrees found in man, in the same order —the immorality of the human spirit, a righteous system of divine government, the enjoining of the practice of all moral and social virtues and duties, by means of lessons embodied in the symbolic representations of deep significance together

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Editorial

Recently, while attending a meeting of a Lodge at which Grand Lodge officers were in attendance, I heard a member, when called upon for a few remarks during a period of refreshment, make the statement that he had a story to tell, but felt he should not tell it owing to the presence of what he termed "the brass." It was thus indicated that under ordinary circumstances it might be considered quite in order to tell a story of doubtful character.

It is to be hoped that such stories may at all times be withheld at Masonic gatherings, for surely the sacred precincts of a Masonic Lodge should be free from any repetition of stories which have no moral value but which can serve only to degrade the individual telling them and all who are forced to hear them. It is apparent that those who seek an affiliation with Freemasonry do so because they feel that the high principles of the Order hold something of value for them and certainly stories of dubious nature have absolutely no place within the portals of a Lodge, whether it be at work or engaged in social intercourse.

Recalling nearly forty years of membership in the Craft there have been few occasions indeed when members so far forgot themselves as to venture into the realm of obscenity or near obscenity as a subject of entertainment within the portals of a Masonic Lodge, and this has been a matter for the greatest satisfaction and pleasure.

If we permit our minds to go back to our earlier days within the Craft we can readily remind ourselves that we were strictly abjured to refrain from religious or political discussions which would tend to disrupt the harmony of the Lodge; it was rightfully deemed unnecessary by our mentors to require that we refrain from the use of uncouth language within the Lodge or the hearing of its adherents.

One has only to consider the beauty of the ritual and the delightful language of the ancient charges to know inherently that Freemasonry speaks only in terms of beauty and that no word must be permitted which might tend to sully that beauty.

We are desirous that men of intellectual worth ally themselves with us and that the genuine tenets of our profession may mean much to all who seek admission to our ranks; let us then be ever watchful of all that we say or do, so that all of the beauty of Freemasonry may be permitted to influence the lives of our Brothers and fellows and may serve to strengthen the highly idealistic reputation which has been so faithfully and carefully built up through generations of time . . . by men of honour, or integrity and of responsibility.

—S. C. H.

Faith is positive, enriching life in the here and now. Doubt is negative, robbing life of glow and meaning. So, though I do not understand immortality, I choose to believe.

—George Washington.

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with apt and wisely ordered discourse, all contained in certain ancient and simple, but sublime, ceremonies co-ordinated in degrees according to the order of the universe which is the divine order. And further that the filling up of this general scheme is by lessons not taught in words so much as by representations of correspondences actually existing in the constitution of natural and spiritual things in their several degrees, and cognizable by man; that these lessons, in order of their perpetuation, are embodied in the forms of the lodge and what may be found therein, and especially in what is termed The Work, the principal truths and illustrations being set forth by means of geometry, upon which science, as we are expressly taught, Freemasonry is founded.

As yet we have not found the answer to the question, WHAT IS FREEMASONRY? Freemasonry is a word used to describe the beliefs and practices of Freemasons and the way in which the local units, called lodges, are governed and linked together. A craft rather than an order, it is secret only in having rituals and other matters not to be divulged to non-members, a society with secrets, but not a secret society. Its places of meetings are prominently identified and its governing bodies publish annual proceedings. The membership is a matter of record and perhaps sometimes public knowledge. In communist and completely totalitarian countries Freemasonry is proscribed. The Roman Catholic Church forbids its members to be Freemasons, although many of that faith were active Freemasons in the 18th and 19th centuries. In Great Britain, the Commonwealth countries, Scandinavia, the United States and other nations with similar institutions, heads of government, dignitaries and distinguished citizens are Freemasons. Men from all walks of life meet together in their adherence to a moral code whose principles are largely conveyed through symbols and allegories connected with the art of building, and emphasizing benevolence. A Freemason, it was said about 1735, "is to be a man of Benevolence and Charity, not sitting down contented while his Fellow Creatures, but much more his Brethren are in Want, when it is in his power, without prejudicing himself or family to relieve them."

Is there one among us who at some time or other has not asked himself: What is this Freemasonry? What is it all about? Who of us has not wondered how it is, that simple as its teachings appear, it has so gripped the imagination of men and has retained its appeal and influence throughout the centuries and is still the greatest moral force, with the exception of the religious institutions, the world has known. When we can answer those questions we will have a clearer vision of our Order and the purpose of Freemasonry. Far be it from me to suggest that I can hope to give a complete and satisfactory answer, but rather that I may express some thoughts on the subject which may assist one to reach one's own conclusions, also that I may be of some assist-

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ance to our younger Brethren in interpreting the beautiful symbolism of our Order—the key to our treasure chest which holds for us the wisdom of the ages. There are many definitions of Freemasonry, for instance, our ritual defines it as a peculiar system of morality, veiled in allegory and illustrated by symbols. Another definition is “that it is a science which is engaged in the search after Divine Truth.” Still another writer interprets Freemasonry as “Friendship, Love and Integrity; Friendship which rises superior to fictitious destruction of Society, the prejudices of Religion and the pecuniary conditions of Life. Love which knows no limit, nor inequality nor decay; Integrity which binds man to the Eternal Law of Duty.”

Perhaps the most complete and best definition is that given in the German Handbuch which states “Freemasonry is an activity of closely united men, who, employing symbolical forms borrowed principally from the mason’s trade and from architecture, work for the welfare of mankind, striving morally to enoble themselves and others and thereby bring about a universal league of mankind.”

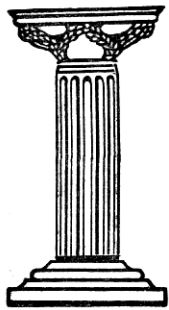
However inadequate these descriptions may be they all indicate that Freemasonry has a very noble objective and a definite purpose, and I may add that without such a purpose it would long since have passed into oblivion and could not have survived the ravages of time. Why is Freemasonry here in this world of strife? Wherefore has it been developed, amid war and incessant conflict, along lines of peace and love, and so marvellously moulded and developed, that in every land it is now known and by every race made welcome? Has all this been done that it may live for itself alone? No, there is on its Trestleboard the plan of the Great Architect and its mission is to work out that plan. Out of the rough hard quarries of a quarreling humanity it has to build a Temple of Brotherhood and Peace. This Temple is the Great Landmark—the highest and grandest ideal of Freemasonry.

To build, strengthen and beautify it we must exercise all the powers and gifts with which we are endowed. What nobler work can we do? Yet how far we are, as a rule, from understanding it. Yet it is ignorance more than unwillingness that hinders the work. That is a noble conception of the purpose to which Freemasonry is dedicated and if we examine our Ritual and Symbolical Teachings we will find this great idea continually brought before us. Free and Accepted and Symbolical Freemasonry, as we know it, emphasizes that we are builders in the Spiritual sense, thus the fact that the Working Tools of the old operative Freemasonry occupy a prominent place in our Lodges and are used for the purpose of instructing us in great spiritual and ethical principles of which they are symbolic. Those tools with which operative craftsmen earned their living were also, because of the great moral and spiritual teachings associated with them, used by him to think out his faith by which to live. The connection between Operative and Speculative

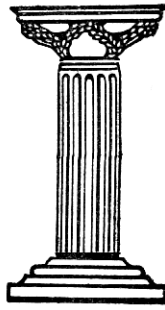
Masonry may be briefly considered at this juncture as it may be helpful in the consideration of our subject. For many centuries lodges of Operative Freemasons existed and reached their greatest strength during the cathedral building era in the Middle Ages, when magnificent cathedrals were erected throughout the Old World. It was also during that period, known as the Dark Middle Ages, there set in a decline in moral and spiritual standards, and so it happened that the most exquisite gems of architecture were surrounded by hovels in which lived a depraved type of humanity. The viciousness of human nature formed an appalling contrast to the creative genius of craftsmanship; was it this that caused the progenitors of our Order to believe that the principles of disciplined and devoted craftsmanship productive of such beauty in architecture could be applied to human affairs and enable men to build a superstructure perfect in all its parts and honourable to the builder? And so with the gradual decline in the building era and the consequent decline in lodges of Operative Masons, modern Freemasonry gradually grew in strength and inherited the symbolism and teachings to be used to stimulate in man the dignity and high purpose of life. And so with our Ancient Brethren, our Freemasonry has much in common—those same symbols and tokens signify the great spiritual truths underlying its teachings, and although Freemasonry is no longer engaged in erecting temples in stone it carries on the teaching that we are engaged in building a spiritual temple which age cannot affect, nor death destroy.

Erected on the everlasting foundation of the Fatherhood of God and the Brotherhood of Man, Freemasonry is not a religion, neither does it refuse membership to men on account of the religion they practice. Christian, Jew, Mohammedan or Buddhist, it matters not; worshipping God as the Supreme Being they may enter its ranks. It respects every religious Faith and Belief and honours men as men irrespective of their social status. It has no creed of bigotry and no spirit of intolerance. It makes for humanity and morality, and for brotherly love in the widest and noblest meaning. To ensure happiness man must live with God and man. The very first requirement of a Freemason is an expression of his faith in God, and when progressing through the various stages he is impressed with the lessons of charity and mutual help, which better fit him to take his place in the world as a man and a citizen. The ultimate truth he learnt is, that the real soul of Freemasonry is to be discovered in fellowship and service for God and for his fellowman. Of this great truth we are constantly reminded and it is conveyed to us in many aspects of our symbolism. Therefore, What is Freemasonry itself if not a world-builder, a social architecture on the grand style. With its fellowships established in every nation under Heaven, its activities never ceasing, night or day, its message uttered in nearly all the languages of the races, but always the same message, it is one of the mightiest, one of the

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Between the Pillars



Character Above Riches

ELBERT BEDE 33° — IN THE NEW AGE

Character is the greatest of human attributes. It is greater than riches, for riches may be a curse to one deficient in character. It is greater than religion, for church buildings would rot and decay if persons of character did not stand as the bulwarks of religion. It is greater than our social fabric, for, were it not for character, men would fear to associate with one another. It is greater than governments, for without character, governments would crumble in the dust, anarchy would triumph, property rights would vanish, food and clothing would be for the strong, marriage would cease to be an institution and women would be playthings of the strong. It is greater than reputation, for reputation may be despoiled and taken from us by an ill-spoken word, but character is ours while we live and cannot be lowered by scandal nor raised by undeserved praise or compliments.

Reputation is what people say about us. Character is what we know ourselves to be; we make our own character and can mould it at will. Reputation is made by our friends and our enemies. A scandalmonger may blacken reputation in a moment, but character remains ours to be used in living down the poisoned words of the tale-bearer.

While a good name is of immense value in our dealings with the world, by loss of it we have lost something of material value only, while if we retain character, we retain all our spiritual wealth. When character is lost, we have lost everything, both material and spiritual, and are poor indeed. Character is symbolic of our attitude toward the laws of God and man; character is exemplified by our interest in the welfare and comfort of our fellows; character develops through fulfillment of duties we are capable of performing in a worthwhile service; character is everything that we are, everything that we hope to be.

Never before has there been greater need for men and women of character, and at no time has there been less interest by so many persons in the nobler and better things. Never before has there been more seeking for the pleasures and sins that weaken character; never before has there been less interest in the election to office of men of character; never before has there been greater disregard for the law; never before has there been greater disrespect for the rights of others; never

before has there been more selfishness and less sacrifice.

Men and women of character are needed for public places; men and women of character are needed for examples of respect for law; men and women of character are needed as mothers and fathers of those who soon will take our places. One of the greatest troubles with the world today seems to be that children haven't the parents children had in the good old days to which we would not return but from which we might learn much about character building.

Today, building character is far more difficult than ever. Pleasures are too common, life too free. Great characters were built in the days when men and women drove back the cougar and the rattlesnakes and carved homes out of the wilderness, when food and clothing were of the coarsest, when school children walked two and three miles to school and sat on benches hewn from logs; when a preacher travelled long distances covering a circuit, when men and women provided their own pleasures, when there were no true "lies" magazines and the Bible formed a large part of the reading of the family, when there was a greater belief in the power of prayer and less belief in the power of self. Great characters are built in overcoming trials, in surmounting great obstacles, in hurdling obstructions that others said could not be overcome, in achieving great ends against great odds.

George Washington, a man of wealth, a social lion, built character that fateful winter at Valley Forge; Abraham Lincoln, the great emancipator, built character when he studied by the light of the fireplace, while others frittered away their time.

We can build character by doing things others have done, but we can't build character by doing things merely because others have done them. We can build character by doing the things which each of us knows he should be doing and there are ways and means at hand of learning how to do them if we will but take advantage of them.

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most benign, one of the most constructive of all the forces in the world. When its work is finished, which will not be until the end is ended, it will have proved itself a builder of an unseen cathedral more noble, more enduring, than any ever made of stone.

The Bulletin of the Grand Lodge of Alberta is indebted to R. W. Bro. M. A. R. Howard, Deputy Grand Master of the Grand Lodge of British Columbia for the use of this outstanding paper presented to the Eighteenth Annual Conference of Officers of the four Western Canadian Masonic Jurisdictions, in September 1958.

R. W. Bro. Howard has had a distinguished Masonic career, and has effectively edited the Bulletin in his own Province for some years.

The Proceedings of this annual conference are available from Grand Lodge, at a nominal charge and contain a great deal of material worthy of the study of every thinking Mason.

Editor.