

THE MEANING OF MASONIC OBLIGATIONS

M.W. BROTHER R.V. HARRIS, PGM, PGS OF THE GRAND LODGE OF NOVA SCOTIA

The obligation is the turning point of every degree; it makes a man an E.A.; a F.C., a M.M.

As early as 1738, objection was taken to an oath of secrecy taken on the Holy Bible and a few years later in 1757, the Synod of Seceders of Scotland condemned the Masonic Order on five grounds, namely; that it is an oath of secrecy; secondly, that such an oath is considered by Freemasons as paramount to the laws of the land; thirdly, that such oaths are administered before the secrets of Freemasonry are communicated; fourthly, that they are accompanied by certain objectionable ceremonies, and lastly, that to each is attached a penalty which is ridiculous and absurd. Is there anything in these criticisms?

What is an oath or obligation? The word "obligation" comes from a Latin word obligatio - a binding to, a tie. The same root lig is to be found in the words, ligament and religion. An obligation is more than an oath, it is more than a vow, it combines both. An Obligation is a promise made solemnly and under the penalty or sanction of one's religious belief.

Let us now consider the five objections made:

First, "Freemasons require oaths of secrecy"

An oath cannot be objectionable or open to criticism unless immoral; nor simply because it imposes secrecy, or the performance of a good action, or requires the person who takes it to refrain from something objectionable, or obliges one to do something which is not forbidden by Divine or human law. Where the time, place and circumstances do not involve levity or profanity or crime, an oath of secrecy; or of obedience, or to be truthful, and calling on God to be a witness or to punish one for its violation is incapable by any perversion of Scripture or of reasoning to be regarded as criminal or immoral. Calling on God to witness is a recognized part of all oaths, and calling down God's wrath for its violation is implied even if not expressed.

Oaths are as old as mankind and were used by pagans and barbarians to secure certainty in evidence or the performance of a pledge. Oaths were common in Old

Testament times. In early England from King Alfred to Edward I, an oath of allegiance to the King was administered to every free man every year. The King himself was sworn into office and afterwards all officers of the Crown and all judges and jurors. The world is held together today by oaths and obligations.

All rulers and administrators, legislators and executive officers of high and low degree in state and municipalities, and in every phase of human society are bound by their oaths of office. Without oaths the world would lapse into disorder, confusion and anarchy.

In civil society we find that ties and obligations bind all men together. We speak of the marriage bond or tie; all fraternal orders, good and bad and indifferent, are built on formal obligations; as are all religious orders and societies. Baptism is a form of obligation and so are many Church ceremonies. If we ceased to administer oaths or obligations, society itself would be dissolved and, of course, all justice and right dealing.

The obligation in the Old Charges was very brief; "There are several words and signs of a Freemason to be revealed to you which as you will answer before God at the great and terrible Day of Judgment, you are to keep secret and not to reveal the same to any in the hearing of any person whatsoever but to the Masters and fellows of the said Society of Freemasons. So help me God." A Masonic obligation was originally taken "By the holy contents of this Book and Holy Church," or "So help me God and the holy contents of this Book."

Second; Are oaths "placed higher by Freemasons than the law of the land?"

To us, as Freemasons this is an absurd charge, for the observance of law and order and the duty of patriotism are primary duties imposed on all freemasons. Freemasonry is organized patriotism, standing for just laws, loyalty and cooperation. There is no room in Freemasonry for treason or disloyalty. Freemasonry is the enemy of communism and anarchy; does not tolerate the undermining of public virtue or social stability; and has no use for the man who plots behind the flag which protects him. "In the state you are to be a quiet and peaceable citizen, true to your government and just to your country. You are not to countenance disloyalty or rebellion, but patiently submit to legal authority and conform with cheerfulness to the government of the country in which you lie. A Masonic lodge is a guarantee of good order, and strength to the community, it stands for morality and law and for law-abiding citizenship. There are today

thousands of Freemasons in positions of trust and responsibility in the state. No rebellion was ever plotted in a Masonic lodge for the Masonic obligation binds us to uprightness and fair dealing and there is not even a line or a syllable to support the charge or objection made to the contrary.

Third: "That the oath is exacted before the secrets of Freemasonry are made known."

This too is equally absurd, for it is obvious that if the secrets were made known first, the candidate would have an option as to whether he would take it. If an oath or secrecy is itself proper then the proper time for such an oath is before revelation and not after.

If you wish to tell your friend a secret, you first exact a promise from him not to tell. The person to be bound knows what it general import is, whether an oath or allegiance to the King, or a declaration that he will not reveal the manes of recognition such as the words, grips, and tokens, and he is assured that there is nothing therein contained which will conflict with his duty to God, his country, his neighbour or himself.

The fourth objection is that "Masonic oaths are accompanied by certain ceremonies"; presumably the placing of one's hand on the Holy Bible and kissing it three times.

We all know that all oaths in all countries are accompanied by peculiar rites, obviously to increase the solemnity of the occasion. An ancient Hebrew placed his hand on the thigh of the person to whom the promise was given. Abraham said to King of Sodom - "I have lifted up my hand unto the Lord, that I will not take anything that is thine." The Greeks placed their hands on the horns of the altar or touched the sacrificial fire, or extended the right hand to heaven and swore by the earth, the sea and the stars. The Romans laid their hands on the hand of him to whom a promise was given. In solemn covenants, oaths were accompanied by sacrifice and a portion of the hair of the victim's head was given to all witnesses. The ancient Germans solemnized the occasion by placing their hands on holy relics. A soldier placed his hand on his country's standard. In China to break a saucer or extinguish a light is regarded as imposing greater solemnity. The Jewish oath in court today is given with the hat on, followed by kissing the Old Testament. In English Courts, we have, since A.D. 528, held up the hand or kissed the Bible or placed the right hand on the Bible. The ancient Church approved of this ceremony as far back as the Council of Nice 321 A.D.

The last objection, namely that "the penalties are absurd and ridiculous" is perhaps the most difficult to answer.

The criticism is made that not only are these penalties ridiculous and absurd but they are terrorizing and shocking. They are, however, not to be taken literally, although Kipling records an instance where a Lascar crew carried out the penalty of the M.M. degree on one of their number who violated it. Some Freemasons who are timid and uninstructed may be disposed to accept this criticism.

Freemasonry is described as "the gentle Craft". Its teachings are brotherly love, relief, truth, Love of God, charity, immortality, sympathy and mutual help. Its penalties would naturally shock their timid minds. They come with some surprise and consternation, and there has been some agitation to simplify and modernize these obligations and their penalties.

It must be admitted that they are archaic and obsolete and altogether unintelligible to modern minds and so much misunderstood. It is contended that Lodges are schools in which men may learn the way of right living and high thinking; that Freemasonry exemplifies the spirit of humanitarianism, kindness and charity and that vengeance and retaliation have no place in Freemasonry. It is argued that simpler penalties would be more sensible and more solemn and binding.

The fact is that these penalties were in everyday life in the 17th and 18th centuries; the 1600's and 1700's.

The English Court of Admiralty had jurisdiction from High water mark over the seven seas, and that above high water mark other Courts exercised their jurisdiction. The code of Henry VI, therefore, directed that the punishments of Admiralty should be inflicted at low water mark. They were terrible and barbarous; the prisoner's hands and feet were tied; his throat cut; his tongue pulled out and his body thrown into the sea or buried at low water mark.

The Laws of the Frisians or Low Germans directed that for robbing a pagan temple, the criminal should be dragged to the sea shore and buried in the sands at low water mark.

By the Scandinavian code a creditor might subject his delinquent debtor to the penalty of having flesh torn from his breast and fed to the birds of prey; and convicts were adjudged to have their heart cut out and you have the same penalty

referred to in Shakespeare's "Merchant of Venice" for failure to pay a debt. the oldest codes prescribed exposure of the body of a criminal to the fowls of the air; or that it should be burnt to ashes and the ashes scattered to the four winds of Heaven.

In the Roman code perjury was punished by the tongue being torn out by the roots. In some codes a halter or cord about the neck was used symbolically to denote that the accused was worthy of decapitation or hanging or servitude or slavery. In England, until recent centuries punishments were horrible and inhuman. As late as the 17th century the punishments for treason and all crimes were absurd and severe. Until 1827, the penalty for theft in England and all Canadian colonies was hanging and there are numerous instances of this penalty for very petty thefts within the past one hundred and fifty years. Fortunately, humanity has modified our penal methods; the punishment now fits the crime and fits as well the criminal.

Now Freemasonry adopted the present obsecrations and penalties at a time when they were familiar to everyone and regarded as proper and reasonable. No freemason in his sane senses entertains the view that he may or is bound to take the law into his own hands and punish a brother Mason for violation of oath in the manner of the penalty of his obligation. We are all bound to observe the present laws of society, not those which have been repealed. The only Masonic penalty is suspension or expulsion; the scorn and detestation of the Craft.

An obsecration was, and is, part of all ancient and modern oaths. The Romans said; "May the gods destroy me!" or "May I die", for the offence of false swearing was not against man but against the gods, and false swearing was to be punished by the gods and not by man. "May the gods destroy me" means "I am so convinced of the truth of what I say that I am willing to be destroyed by the gods if what I say is untrue." There was no notion or agreement to submit to death at the hands of his fellows. When a Mason adds a penalty to his obligations he declares that he is worthy of such a penalty, if he speaks untruly, or that such a punishment would be just and proper. "May I die if this be not true, or if I keep not my vow" said the ancient. Not "may any man put me to death."

In Masonic penalties there is an invocation of God's vengeance should the maker of the obligation violate it; and not a submission to human punishment. Man's vengeance is confined to contempt and infamy which the perjury incurs.

The use of a "sharp instrument" in our ceremonies is an intimation that a punishment awaits all who violate their obligations, a reminder that the violation of any duty brings its own penalty; the way of the transgressor is hard; "The wages of sin is death." Masonic penalties are symbolical as are all parts of Masonic ceremonies.

Again obligations with archaic phrases and penalties ink us up with the long past. This modern age is too hasty and too often irreverent of the past and of historical continuity. The Church does not discard ancient practices merely because they are old. The glory of the Church is its many links with the past; they are evidence of continuity and authenticity.

Again, and most important, these penalties are part of a universal system of penalties in Freemasonry and the basis of unchangeable means of recognition everywhere throughout the Masonic world.

Our obligations bind every member to the society and its aims and objects, make him feel his brotherhood with other members of the lodge, and of Freemasonry throughout the world and with all who have taken the same obligations. Again our obligations require all brethren to adopt a certain course of action towards others who are brethren; our obedience to a summons; our duty to help aid and assist others; to refrain from inuring others; to refrain from Masonic intercourse with outsiders, and with irregular Freemasons and to discountenance all irregularities and immoralities.

The ideal Mason is one whose word is his bond; who can be depended upon to do what he undertakes to do; to be what he ought to be; who recognizes his obligations, not only to his fellows in Freemasonry, but to his brother man as well. To take a Masonic obligation is to declare allegiance to all Masonic principles, so that he may be accepted as a responsible member of the family of Masons. I accept you, you accept me, because we have knelt at the same altar, taken the same obligations, and are bound to the same service. Let the world rave and criticise as it will; it can never tear down the structure we have built which we call Brotherhood.