

SYMBOLS AND THEIR SIGNIFICANCE IN FREEMASONRY

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GREAT ARCHITECT OF THE UNIVERSE;

This is the title applied in the technical language of Freemasonry to the Deity. It is appropriate that a Society founded on the principles of Architecture which symbolizes the terms of that science to moral purposes, and whose members profess to be the Architects of a Spiritual Temple, should view the Divine Being, under whose Holy law they are constituting that edifice, as their Master Builder or Great Architect.

SQUARE AND COMPASSES;

These two symbols (essentially a part of the Greater Lights) have been so long and so universally combined - to teach us, as says an early ritual, "to square our actions and to keep them within due bounds", they are seldom seen apart, but are so kept together, either as two great lights, or as a jewel worn once by the Master of the Lodge now by the Past Master - that they have become at last to be recognized as the proper badge of a Master Mason.

So universally has this symbol been recognized even by the profane World, as the peculiar characteristic of Freemasonry, that it had at one time in the United States been made the subject of a legal decision. A manufacturer of flour having made, in 1873, an application to the Patent Office for permission to adopt the square and compasses as a trade-mark, the Commissioner of Patents refused the permission on the ground that the mark was a Masonic Symbol. The Commissioner in his decision said in part "... in view of the magnitude and extent of the Masonic organization, it is impossible to divest its symbols, or at least this particular symbol - perhaps the best known of all - of its ordinary signification, wherever displayed either as an arbitrary character or otherwise. It will be universally understood, or misunderstood, as having a Masonic significance; and, therefore, as a trade-mark must constantly work deception. Nothing could be more mischievous than to create as a monopoly, and uphold by the power of law, anything as calculated as applied to purposes of trade, to be misinterpreted, to mislead all classes, and to constantly foster suggestions of mystery in affairs of business."

In Masonic symbolism the Square and Compasses refer to the Mason's duty to the craft and to himself; hence it is properly a symbol of brotherhood, and they're significantly adopted as the badge or token of the Fraternity.

ALL SEEING EYE:

It is an important symbol of the Supreme being, borrowed by the Freemasons from the nations of antiquity. Both the Hebrew and the Egyptians appear to have derived its use from that natural inclination of figurative minds to select an organ as the symbol of the function which it is intended peculiarly to discharge. The foot was often adopted as the symbol of swiftness, the arm the symbol of strength, and the horn the symbol of fidelity. On the same principle the open eye was selected as the symbol of watchfulness, and the eye of God as the symbol of Divine watchfulness and care of the universe.

The All seeing Eye may then be considered as a symbol of God manifested in his omnipresence - his guardian and preserving character - to which Solomon alludes in the Book of Proverbs (XV.3) when he says: "The eyes of the Lord are in every place, beholding the evil and the good." It is a symbol of the Omnipresent Deity.

The Masonic Altar supports no creeds, nor embraces any particular sect. It is, first of all, an Altar of Faith, the deep eternal faith which underlies all creeds and overarches all sects, faith in God, in the moral law, and in life everlasting; secondly, it symbolizes recognition, recognition of that most inspiring and wonderful of all facts - the Brotherhood of man.

ASHLAR;

In Speculative Masonry we adopt the Ashlar in two different states, as symbols in the Apprentice Degree. The Rough Ashlar, or stone in its rude and unpolished condition, is emblematic of man in his natural state - ignorant, uncultivated and vicious. But when education has exerted its wholesome influence in expanding his intellect, restraining his passions, and purifying his life he then is represented by the Perfect Ashlar, which under the skilful hands of the workmen has been smoothed, and squared, and fitted for its place in the Building.

CORN, WINE AND OIL;

Corn, Wine, and Oil are the Masonic elements of consecration. The adoption of these symbols is supported by the high antiquity. Corn, wine and oil were the most important productions of Eastern countries; they constituted the wealth of the people, and were esteemed as the supports of life and the means of refreshment. David enumerates them among the greatest blessings that we enjoy, and speaks of them as 'wine that maketh glad the heart of man, and oil to make his face to shine, and bread which strengtheneth man's heart.' Hence Freemason Lodges, which are but Temples to the Most High, are consecrated to the sacred purposes for which they were built by stewing corn, wine, and oil upon the 'Lodge', the emblem of the Holy Ark. Thus does this mystic ceremony instruct us to be nourished with the hidden manna of righteousness, to be refreshed with the Word of the Lord, and to rejoice with joy unspeakable in the riches of divine grace.

"Wherefore do you carry corn, wine, and oil in your processions but to remind you that in the pilgrimage of human life you are to impart a portion of your bread to feed the hungry, to send a cup of your wine to cheer the sorrowful, and to pour the healing oil of your consolation into the wounds which sickness hath made in the bodies, or affliction rent in the hearts, of your fellow-travellers."

The letter 'G':

As in all Roman Catholic and in many Protestant Churches the Cross, engraved or sculptured in some prominent position, will be found as the expressive symbol of Christianity, so in every Masonic Lodge a letter "G" may be seen in the East, either painted on the wall or sculptured in wood or metal and suspended over the Master's Chair. This is, in fact, if not the most prominent, certainly the most familiar of all the symbols of Freemasonry. Indeed, the symbol, made sacred by its reference to the Grand Geometrician of the Universe, was well worthy to be applied to that science which has, from the remotest times, been deemed synonymous with Masonry.

HOUR GLASS:

An emblem used to remind us by the quick passage of its sands of the transitory nature of human life.

ACACIA:

The Acacia, in the mythic system of Freemasonry, is preeminently the symbol of the Immortality of the Soul, that important doctrine which it is the great design of the Institution to teach. As the evanescent nature of the flower, which "cometh forth and is cut down", reminds us of the transitory nature of human life, so the perpetual renovation of the evergreen plant, which uninterruptedly presents the appearance of youth and vigor, is aptly compared to that spiritual life in which the soul, freed from the corruptible companionship of the body shall enjoy an eternal spring and an immortal youth.

APRON:

There is no one of the symbols of Speculative Masonry more important in its teachings, or more interesting in its history, than the lambskin or white leather apron. Commencing its lessons at an early period in the Mason's progress, it is impressed upon his memory as the first gift which he receives, the first symbol which is explained to him and the first tangible evidence which he possesses of his admission into the Fraternity. Whatever may be his future achievements in this "royal art" into whatsoever deeper arena his devotion to the mystic Institution of his thirst for knowledge may subsequently lead him, with the lambskin apron - his first investure - he never parts. Changing, perhaps, its form and its decorations, and conveying at each step, some new but still beautiful allusion, its substance is still there, and it continues to claim the honoured title by which it was first made known to him, on the night of his initiation as "the emblem of innocence, and the badge of a Mason, more ancient than the Golden Fleece or Roman Eagle, more honourable than the Star and Garter."

THE BIBLE, ITS PLACE AND THE PURPOSE IN OUR SOCIETY:

While our Society is divided into various denominations with different creeds, philosophies, beliefs and religious proceedings, there are nevertheless, certain things that all men of religious faith have in common. Not the least among these is our common use of the Holy Bible.

Upon the Altar of every Fraternal Organization, whose belief is in God, and upon the pulpit of every Church, lies the Holy Bible. The old familiar Book, so

beloved by so many generations as our volume of Sacred Law, and a great light to our faith. In Fraternal Organizations, the Bible opens when the Lodge opens, and closes when the Lodge closes. In our Churches, no service is conducted without a passage being read from the Bible. Thus the Book of the Will of God rules our Society in its labors as the Sun rules the day, making its work a worship.

Nor is it strange that it should be so. As faith in God is the cornerstone of our Society, so naturally, the Book which tells us the highest truth about God is its Altar Light. In the midst of ignorant idolatries and debasing superstitions, the messages contained and revealed in the Holy Bible, stood for the Unity, Righteousness and Spirituality of God. Upon no other foundation can we build with any sense of security.

Therein our Society is wise, building its Temple square with the order of the world and the needs and hopes of men, erecting its philosophy upon faith in spiritual verity and ruling its conduct by immutable principles of the moral law. While we may not say that our Fraternity is a Religion, in the sense that it is one religion among many, it is nonetheless religious in spirit and purpose: not simply a code of ethics, but a fraternity founded upon religious faith - its teachings transfigured by the truths of faith which lie behind all sects and religions and which are the exclusive possession of none. We seek to develop moral and spiritual life, to purify thought, to refine and exalt character - in short, to build men and then make them Brothers and Builders; and to that end we take the Bible as our Guide, Prophet and Friend.

By the same token, Masonry knows a secret almost too simple to be found out, whereby it avoids the angry disputes about the Bible by which men are divided into sects. Our Society should be profoundly religious, but not dogmatic. The fact that the Bible lies open upon the Altar of Fraternal Organizations and upon the pulpit in our Churches means that man must have some Divine revelation, must seek for a light higher than human to guide and govern him. But, should our Society lay down a hard and fast dogma as to the nature of revelation? Should it attempt a detailed interpretation of the Bible? The Great Book lies in its exalted place, open for all to read, open for each to interpret for himself. It should be the genius of our Society to unite men, not upon a creed bristling with debated issues, but upon the broad, simple truth which underlies all creeds and overarches all sects - faith in God, the wise Master-Builder, for whom and with whom man must work.

For that reason, no matter how widely religious teachers may differ in their doctrines, in a moral Society they should meet with mutual respect and good will.

In such a kindly air of fellowship they would discover that the things they have in common are greater than the things that divide. It should be the glorious principle of our Society to teach Unity in essentials, Liberty in details, Charity in all things, on the ground that all just men, all devout men, are everywhere of one religion seeking to remove the hoodwinks of prejudice and intolerance so that men may recognize each other and work together in the doing of good.

Every member of a just and upright Society ought to know why the Bible holds the exalted position that it does, source of strength, a focus of fellowship, and a symbol of the will of God for the life of man. Today the Holy Bible is central, sovereign, supreme, the master light of all our seeing, a law to our hearts and a light to our path. From its position it pours forth upon the East, the West, the South and the North, its white light of spiritual vision, moral law and immortal hope.

The Bible is a chamber of imagery, a book of parables, a literature of symbols, and it shows us life under many metaphors and similitudes, among them the imagery of architecture - man the Builder, God the Builder, and men as living stones to be cut, polished and built into a House of the Eternal.

Like so many other things in our way of life, the Bible so rich in symbolism, is itself a symbol - that is, a part taken for a whole. It is a symbol of the Book of Truth, the Scroll of Faith, the Record of the Will of God as man has learned in the midst of the years - the perpetual revelation of Himself which God has made, and is making, to mankind in every race and land. Thus, by the very honour which we pay to the Bible, it teaches us to revere every Book of Faith in which man has found help for the day and hope for the morrow.

None the less, while we honour every Book of Faith in which man has found comfort and command, with us the Bible is supreme, at once the mother-book of our literature and the master-book of our way of Life. Its truth is wrought in the symbolism of our Society and the very fibre of our being, with whatsoever else of the good and true which the past has given us. Its spirit stirs our hearts like a sweet habit of the blood; its vision lights all our way showing us the meaning and worth and destiny of life. Its very words have in them memories, echoes and overtones of voices long since hushed, and its scenery is interwoven with the holiest associations of our lives. Our fathers and mothers read it, finding in it their final reason for living faithfully and nobly.

We recognize the fact that fraternalism does not seem to have the appeal which it once enjoyed. This is probably due to our increased activity in other fields of this complex, competitive and over-organized world in which we live. There are many more things to do today than ever before. Various interests challenge each other for our time and talent.

And as a consequence, fraternalism has suffered and is actually considered by many as an out-moded relic of the Victorian era. It is our job to disprove this opinion and to find the methods by which this appeal once so strong, can be restored.

We are living in a world and in an era of great social upheaval. It is fashionable today to be modern; to consider our forbears as products of the horse and carriage age; a part of a society that has outlived its usefulness. Modern techniques and science have shrunken our World and our Society in an attempt to broaden our minds. It is the jet age - the age of automation. We eat our morning meal one day in our homes and that night retire in a land many thousands of miles away. We hear in our homes the spoken word by means of modern scientific inventions from across great oceans and from distant lands almost instantaneously as it is spoken. The emphasis today is in speed, action and entertainment. These, together with the stress and strain of our commercial and domestic everyday life, leave little time for relaxation and quiet reflection.

It is then in this type of World that we must find a place for and an opportunity to promote the principles of Freemasonry. Freemasonry has no exclusive claim on these imbedded principles of the Fraternity, but it is organized to promote them and to bring about through their application to our Society a freer and better World for all mankind.

Masonry is full of beautiful symbolism. Tradition has accumulated many points of view about our common practices, and numerous lessons are drawn from the history of our ancient brethren. Along with these teachings there have come down to us some excellent standards of conduct to guide us on our earthly way. These have become so well accepted as to be called tenets. The tenets of Masonry are Brotherly Love, Relief and Truth.

Brotherly Love is a beautiful vision. If we humans could put into practice, the millennium would be here. But we are troubled at its implications. We hesitate to accept the doctrine that the whole human race is one big family. This has caused no little concern and some honest doubts as to its soundness. May it be suggested,

however, that the principles of Brotherly Love are sound and possible of fulfilment.

How then can we create this new enthusiasm? First we must give more than lip service to the principles of Freemasonry. We must strive to understand the full import and meaning of our commitments, based on these principles, to create a new Order and a new Society. To go forth into the World armed with this idealism, and have the courage and unfaltering determination to see its fulfilment, should be the dedicated purpose of every Mason.

We shall not have completed our task until misunderstandings and inequalities of many sorts are eradicated. In that day the feet of men will be quick to run the errands of mercy, and the earth will be one great neighbourhood, where misery will disappear, and where mortals will live in equanimity and peace.