

What is Freemasonry?

STUDY OUTLINE No. 1

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Published by
**Wisconsin Grand Lodge Committee
on Masonic Research**

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**Pamphlet No. 30
September 20, 1927**

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NOTE—Let us not attempt to define Freemasonry definitely or completely, because Freemasonry comprehends such a vast field of speculation that the best any of us can hope is a continually improving conception of Masonry. The object of this outline is to develop thought and discussion, and it is the desire of the committee to have suggestions or criticisms brought to their attention.

FREEMASONRY is a Fraternity. It is a voluntary organization of men banded together by ties of mutual interest, for the mutual benefit of each other and of humanity in general. The organization of the present Grand Lodge system was consummated in a tavern in London just a little over two hundred years ago. One of the distinguished students of Masonic history maintains that the Fraternity in its origin had conviviality for its principal purpose, and that the moral and spiritual aspects developed gradually. This viewpoint is, however, held by but few. Even at the earliest period of which we have any record we find tools and implements of architecture were used symbolically to imprint on the mind wise and serious truths. We find in the oldest records of the Lodges certain "Old Charges" which laid down moral precepts. Far more important than any actual recorded facts are the traditions of the Craft. Only a few years after the formation of the first Grand Lodge, dissension arose over alleged deviations from certain customs and usages; and it has always been the peculiar characteristic of Freemasons to hold established customs in the highest veneration. It is therefore certain that even at a time when conviviality was most fully in evidence, and large quantities of refreshments, both solid and liquid, graced the tables of the old Lodges in London taverns, Freemasonry had a real and worthy function, and the convivial feature was only an external mani-

festation of fraternity which had the highest moral and spiritual emotions as its motive force.

The written records of our Lodges at present do not furnish the basic spirit of Freemasonry, and cannot. They only furnish a record of routine business and the various physical activities of the Lodge. Beneath it all is the spirit of fraternity. From the earliest times men have sought fraternal relationship. The strongest tie that binds human hearts is mutual interest in high ideals. The higher the ideals of a fraternity, the stronger it is.

Freemasonry is a science. "The foundation of a speculative science upon an operative art, and the symbolic use and explanation of the terms of that art, for purposes of religious or moral teaching constitute another Landmark of the Order" (Mackey). The real purpose of Freemasonry is to teach the science of morality. Let us not be misled by the idea that it is another "reform movement" which desires to impose dogmatic and conventional interpretations of morality. The science of morality taught in Freemasonry consists of basic principles, self-evident to those who apply themselves to a study of these principles with reasonable diligence; and so universal in character as to enable Freemasonry to unite men of every country, sect and opinion.

Freemasonry is a Craft. Freemasons are builders. They are using the tools and implements of an operative art symbolically to build a Temple of Character. This is the real labor of Freemasonry. The wages the craftsman earns enable him to travel into higher planes of usefulness, and more fully to understand the designs on the Trestle-board of the Master Architect as he develops skill.

Freemasonry is an organization. Without organization and the maintenance of Constitution, Laws and Regulations, perpetuation would not be possible, and confusion would prevail. The organization must, however, conform to the ultimate purpose and never lose sight of the fact that it is only an instrument in a great plan.

Freemasonry is a philosophy. We believe that Freemasonry has the correct answer to every problem which confronts human conduct and thought. No man can study the fundamental truths taught in Freemasonry and fail to perceive the highest conceptions of duty to God, his country, his neighbor, his family and himself. The study of Freemasonry gives the key to all true philosophy, eradicates ignorance, prejudice and superstition; and makes possible the recognition of love as the supreme law.

Freemasonry is a life. Am I a Freemason? Not unless I practice Freemasonry, and endeavor to the utmost of my ability to live the life that it teaches me—to be true and square.

The most important thing for every student of the Fraternity is a clear conception of Freemasonry.

A satisfactory concept is only possible by fairly regular attendance at Lodge meetings, participation in active duties; reading Masonic literature, and serious contemplation and analytical study of the ritual and symbolism. While these are intellectual qualifications, it is even more important to develop the spiritual qualification to the highest possible efficiency.

No person can ever comprehend the beauties of Freemasonry solely by an intellectual process. He must be prepared by a sincere desire for knowledge of the higher purposes of life, and be eager to be serviceable to his fellow creatures if he is to enjoy that satisfactory philosophy given to those who apply themselves to the practice of Masonic tenets.

The definition of Freemasonry given to the candidate before he is prepared for initiation states that "Masonry consists of a course of ancient hieroglyphical and moral instructions, taught according to ancient usage by types, emblems and allegorical figures." Types, emblems and allegories have power to develop the highest qualities of our nature; but to

insure this we are called upon for sincerity of purpose and faithful industry. Freemasonry requires petitioners to be good men and gives them the key to knowledge which will make them better men. There is only the limitation of their own inclination to determine how much better they may become. Perfection is the ideal to which Freemasonry strives to lead its votaries. While blemishes mar the character, Freemasonry has work to do. It helps us all to higher ideals, purer thoughts and nobler actions; but it can not help us more than we ourselves elect.

Freemasonry does not teach a peculiar kind of morality. It teaches basic morality common to every people and all times. Many schools of thought teach the same truths that are taught in Freemasonry. Masonry teaches the basic truths on which all religions and ethics are founded.

In addition to the explanations given in the ritual, many Masonic writers have given very beautiful and helpful definitions of Masonry. Albert Pike defines it as "the subjugation of the human that is in man by the Divine; the conquest of the appetite and passions by the moral sense and reason; a continual effort, struggle and warfare of the spiritual against the material and sensual." Rudolph Seydel says it is "a union of unions, an association of men, bound together in their struggle to attain all that is noble, who desire only what is true and beautiful, and who love and practice virtue for its own sake."

Rich and beautiful as these definitions are, our limitations of perception and expression make any comprehensive and inclusive definition impossible. Each of us must formulate for himself such a definition as will most fully conform to the general design and ultimate aim of a philosophy based on the Fatherhood of God and the Brotherhood of Man.

Freemasonry is a system of morality.

A Lodge is a school of morality.

The officers of a Lodge are teachers of morality.

The members of a Lodge are students of morality.

The sole purpose of Freemasonry being to teach morality; the Lodge is a school in which we learn its basic principles. The officers are elected and appointed for the purpose of carrying out the general design, and are expected to have become sufficiently proficient to qualify as instructors. They are bound by ancient custom and usage to teach certain basic principles by our peculiar method of symbolical instruction.

Every brother is charged to carefully preserve the Landmarks and never suffer them to be infringed, and we cannot too often recall this admonition. Just what constitute the Landmarks has been a debated question, and there is no enumeration of them which is universally accepted. There are, however, certain bases which are accepted. The belief in God, the brotherhood of man, and the immortality of the soul are the foundation on which rests this whole system of morality. Freemasonry eventually hopes to unite all humanity into a great Brotherhood in harmony with the laws of their Father.

References:

What is Masonry? Short talk bulletin of Masonic Service Asso.

Mackey's Encyclopedia of Freemasonry.

Articles on Definition of Freemasonry:

Ethics of Freemasonry

Speculative Masonry

Symbolic Degrees

Christianization of Freemasonry

Puerility of Freemasonry

The Great Teachings of Freemasonry.—Haywood.

Chapter 1—What is it all about?

Chapter 2—Why Masonry employs ritual and symbolism.

The Builders.—Newton. Chapter 1—Foundations.

Speculative Masonry.—MacBride. Chapter 1—Its mission.

The Landmarks.—Shepherd.

Ritualistic References:

"The tenets of our profession are Brotherly Love, Relief and Truth."

"By Speculative Masonry we learn to subdue the passions, act upon the square, keep a tongue of good report, maintain secrecy, and practice charity. It is so far interwoven with religion as to lay us under obligation to pay that rational homage to Deity, which at once constitutes our duty and our happiness. It leads the contemplative to view with reverence and admiration the glorious works of creation, and inspires him with the most exalted ideas of the perfection of his Divine Creator."

"Tools and implements of Architecture, and symbolic emblems most expressive, are selected by the Fraternity to imprint on the mind wise and serious truths; and thus, through a succession of ages, are transmitted, unimpaired, the excellent tenets of our institution."

"I will now direct your attention to the emblems delineated on the Master's Carpet; every figure thereon affords a striking lesson of the strictest morality."

"The lamb has, in all ages, been deemed an emblem of innocence; he, therefore, who wears the lamb-skin as the badge of a Mason, is thereby continually reminded of that purity of life and conduct which is essentially necessary to his gaining admission into the Celestial Lodge above, where the Supreme Architect of the Universe presides."

(It seems self-evident that these references will clearly demonstrate the spiritual significance of Freemasonry if they are given the careful consideration and thought they require.)