

WHAT IS FREEMASONRY?

An Address by

M. A. R. HOWARD, D.G.M.
Deputy Grand Master of the
Most Worshipful Grand Lodge of A. F. & A. M. of
British Columbia
Past Master of Adoniram Lodge, No. 118,
Vancouver, B.C.
Member of Walter F. Meier Lodge of Research,
No. 281, Seattle, Washington
Editor, Masonic Bulletin of the Grand Lodge of
British Columbia.

(Delivered before the Conference of Grand Lodges of the four Western Provinces of Canada at Banff, Alberta, on September 5, 1958.)

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 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 this 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 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 the 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 of some of the bitter experiences that life holds in its lap 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 restatement of the simple moral truths we all learned from our parents, from our Sunday school teachers or from the minister in the pulpit. Nor 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 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 the 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 coordination of these last by correspondence. From first to last, their correspondence with the degrees is found in man, in the same order - the immortality 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 symbolic representations of deep significance together with apt and wisely ordered discourse, all contained certain ancient and simple but sublime ceremonies, coordinated in degrees according to the order of the universe which is the divine order. 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 to 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.

And 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 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 meeting 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 eighteenth and early nineteenth 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, emphasizing benevolence. A Freemason, it was said in 1734-1735, "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 amongst 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 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 will assist one to reach one's own conclusions, also that I may be of some assistance 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 Masons' trade and from architecture, work for the welfare of mankind, striving morally to ennoble themselves and others and thereby to 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 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 on its Trestleboard is the plan of the Great Architect and its mission is to work out that plan. Out of the rough, hard quarries of a quarrelling 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 this temple, we must exercise all the powers and gifts with which we are endowed. What nobler work can we be engaged in? 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 ideal continually brought before us.

Free and Accepted, our symbolic Masonry, as we know it, emphasizes that we are builders in the spiritual sense; hence the fact that the working tools of the old operative Freemason 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, worshiping 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 morality and humanity and 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, 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 its fellowship and service for God and his fellow men. 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 race but always the same message, it is one of the mightiest, one of the most benign, one of the most constructive of all 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.