

## **Fifteen Points for Masonic Education**

Author: W.Bro.Steven B. Van Slyck Posted on: Tuesday, August 30, 2005

My Masonic pedigree, while not particularly unusual, has resulted in many discussions with fellow Masons concerning the origins of Freemasonry and the reasons for variations in Masonic ritual. A member of the Order of DeMolay since I was 14, I petitioned for the degrees as soon as my twenty-first birthday drew near. As a Lewis, I was allowed to submit my petition before coming of age, and I was Initiated less than a month following my twenty-first birthday. Being on leave from the U.S. Navy, I was Initiated and Passed in my home lodge, but was Raised as a courtesy candidate in another state.

At a lodge I visited one night, an officer of many years standing noticed that I would be helping out with the degree work and introduced himself to me. He asked about my home lodge and I told him about my receiving the first two degrees in Ohio, but the third in Virginia. He replied that he'd originally come from another state, where the work was quite a bit different than Ohio's, and how this sometimes presented a challenge to him in his ritual work, even though he'd been in Ohio now a number of years. I said I had the same problem, having been active in Virginia for two years before getting out of the Navy. And then it happened, confident and self-assured, the brother said, "Oh, that's Southern Jurisdiction."

I had heard variations of this comment many times, usually along the lines of, "Oh, they're Ancient, Free & Accepted." These remarks had always troubled me, so I answered, "Well, Southern Jurisdiction only applies to Scottish Rite." To which the brother gave the condescending response, "Don't kid yourself, son, all Grand Lodges have different rituals." Stunned, I was just about to follow up when the Master called for the brethren to clothe.

I have been advised by brother Masons that Southern/Northern Jurisdiction and F. & A.M, A.F. & A.M. designations account for differences in lodge or ritual practices on more occasions than I care to remember. Usually such pronouncements are made with a gravity which brooks neither disagreement nor discussion. Knowing the importance of looking for the good in things, I try to remind myself that I have yet to hear anyone tell me that "Masonry in its present form started in remote antiquity."

Believe it or not, this does happen. Bro. Harry Mendoza, a respected Masonic historian, gave a talk at an English lodge once. As he tells it, "My paper dealt with some of the phrases we use today – and one of them was 'from time immemorial.' I said that Freemasonry as we know it today stretched back no more than about 600 years, though some would argue 250 years. A Grand Officer present – of some years' seniority – stood up and said that he couldn't really allow that; I was misleading the brethren. Masonry, he declared firmly, was of time immemorial; it went right back to the time of Noah – and there were degrees to prove it!"

I believe such statements reveal a need for more-focused Masonic education programs, programs aimed at basic misconceptions about the Craft, its structure, and its history. What should be the goals of such a program? Several come to mind, though in no particular order.

### **Our Origins – Separating Fact from Fiction**

1. Compare and contrast traditional or ritualistic history, historical theories, and scholarly historical research.

Traditional/ritualistic history dates Masonry from Adam, and includes the story of Hiram Abif and the Lost Word. The story of Hiram Abif is not biblical, nor does everything in Freemasonry come from the Bible, as I have heard claimed more than once. Sources of traditional history include such things as the Old Charges and the ritual. Traditional history is not history in the true sense of the word, being for the most part fanciful products of the imaginations of various writers. When found in

the ritual, such accounts are meant to teach concepts of morality, not to give an accurate portrayal of past events.

Historical theories, only sometimes supported by valid research and investigation, range from the operative-speculative transition theory championed by Robert Freke Gould and Harry Carr, to the monastic inner sancta theory, proposed by Cyril Batham. Both of these are theories about the origin of speculative Freemasonry. It should be stressed that no one today really knows how the Fraternity originated, but the transition theory seems to have taken on a life of its own, and is too often treated as the last word on the subject. It should be stressed to our students that these are, but theories of origin and not established facts.

Scholarly historical research requires reliable methods of investigation and inquiry. Such works identify opinions and theories as such, provide citations for source materials, rely on direct evidence, where possible instead of hearsay, do not make unwarranted pronouncements or implied assumptions and are not subject to credible attack as to their methodology.

Lodge education officers should both understand for themselves and clearly identify to others, which portions of a program are based on fact, theory, or traditional history. Theories based on poor scholarship should be discouraged in official education programs, or at least properly identified. Let us avoid teaching parables as history.

2. Talk about Masonic research, particularly about the publications of The Masonic Service Association, Quatuor Coronati Lodge, Scottish Rite Research Society, Masonic Book Club, and other reputable sources. Advise Masons where to locate Masonic books, providing names, addresses, and telephone numbers for various publishers. Indicate that the popularity of a book (e.g., *Born in Blood*) or writer (e.g., Arthur Edward Waite) indicates neither soundness of the theories espoused, validity of the conclusions made, nor qualifications of the author. A one-year subscription to *The Short Talk Bulletin* should be given to every Mason with his first dues card. A new Mason could do a lot worse than to begin his study of Freemasonry by reading Carl H. Claudy.

### **Organization and Regularity**

3. Instruct Masons on the structure of American Freemasonry. Make sure new Masons understand that although there is a place in the Fraternity for the concordant and appendant bodies, the Grand Lodge is the ultimate governing authority over the Craft, there is no higher degree than that of Master Mason and the attraction of the side degrees should be viewed in its proper perspective. Impress upon Masons that the jurisdictional arrangements of the Scottish Rite and other such bodies have no relevance to U.S. Grand Lodges nor to U.S. Craft (blue lodge) Masonry in general. Furthermore, make it clear that neither the location of a state on the map nor the designation of a Grand Lodge as F. & A.M. or A.F. & A.M. has any bearing on Grand Lodge regularity. Nor do such designations of themselves reveal anything about a Grand Lodge's parentage or pedigree.

4. Explain that the U.S. structure of Masonry does not obtain in other countries. Explain that in some countries the Craft degrees are under the jurisdiction of the Scottish Rite (or Ancient and Accepted Rite), while in others (e.g., Sweden), the Grand Lodge directly controls advancement to degrees beyond that of Master Mason. Explain that advancement in many parts of the world to the next degree (starting with the Fellow Craft) is neither fast nor automatic, the candidate having much more study to do than is usual in the United States. Further, explain that some Grand Lodges (e.g., Sweden) limit Masonic membership to Christians, though this is not the case in the U.K and U.S.

5. Explain that Freemasonry in the United States is not a Christian organization and that a brother called on to give a non-ritual prayer at a Masonic function should not use words such as "In Christ's Name" as doing so could well be offensive to non-Christian Masons who may be present. It would seem the better path to keep non-ritual prayers on a basis "in which all men agree" as the old charges suggest.

6. Tell of the controversies which gave rise to the Antients Grand Lodge, which then labeled the first Grand Lodge as “Moderns,” what the basic causes of the difficulties were, and how the two Grand Lodges settled their differences and formed the United Grand Lodge of England. Explain that Masons traveling to foreign countries may expect to find different passwords in use (including the S.), as well as different sets of working tools, different ways of presenting the legend of the third degree, different GHSs, and other general differences around the world, particularly between the more popular post-Union rituals used in Britain and the Webb rituals used in the United States. Explain that in some parts of the world (and the U.S., too) the Craft degrees are worked using rituals propounded by the Scottish Rite. Discuss the “Baltimore” Conventions of 1842, 1843, and 1847 and how they affected American Freemasonry, in part by launching the trend for lodges to transact business only on the third degree and curtailing development of a general Grand Lodge for the United States.

7. Explain Prince Hall Masonry. Point out that black and Prince Hall Masons are not necessarily irregular, that irregular black and Prince Hall Masons are not irregular because of race, that a black Mason is not necessarily a Prince Hall Mason, and that many black Masons belong to lodges chartered by so-called “white” grand lodges. Irregularity stems from a Grand Lodge’s pedigree, not the racial makeup of its lodges, and is, in any case, always judged subjectively.

### **THE RITUAL**

8. Explain in general terms the history of Masonic ritual. The original Masonic degrees were Apprentice and Fellow. The Master Mason degree was more or less settled in the 1720s and the Royal Arch arose in the 1730s, but all other degrees are more recent innovations and arose outside of the Craft Masonry setting. Grand Lodges have sovereign authority to determine what Craft rituals will be used in their jurisdictions. A Grand Lodge may specify a particular ritual, or may leave the matter up to local lodges and simply set general guidelines. The designations “F. & A.M.,” “A.F. & A.M.,” “F.A.A.M.,” or otherwise are irrelevant as far as ritual is concerned.

9. Explain the origin of the words, “So mote it be,” being Middle English for “So may it be” or “So be it,” and appearing twice in the Regius Manuscript. Provide new Masons with a properly translated copy of the Regius MS and suggest that they read John Hamill’s book, *The History of English Freemasonry*.

10. Explain that Masonic ritual is supposed to make sense spiritually and emotionally, not logically or historically. Take, for example, the Pythagorean theorem, which relates the lengths of the sides of a right triangle to its hypotenuse, stated algebraically as  $a^2+b^2=c^2$ . Mathematical historians dispute whether Pythagoras himself ever posited the theorem named after him or devised a proof of it. But in either case, the Babylonians made use of the theory by about 2,000 B.C., some 1,400 years before Pythagoras was born. Nothing survives of Pythagoras’ work, although the “bride’s chair proof” or “proof walking on stilts” as it has been called, popularized by Euclid and shown on Masonic tracing boards, is as good a representation as any of how the early Greeks would have approached the problem. The proof is used as the Past Master symbol by our English brethren. Nor is Pythagoras famous for saying “Eureka,” meaning “I have found it.” It was Archimedes, who gave this exclamation when, sitting in his bath, he realized how to determine whether the crown of Hieron II, King of Syracuse, was pure gold by immersing it in water to discover its specific gravity. Pythagoras was not, of course, “raised to the sublime degree of Master Mason.” There was no such thing during his time.

11. Foster an interest in quality ritual and encourage establishment of lodges of instruction. The cipher ritual is not a substitute for rehearsals and must not be used as a crutch. A lodge of instruction could, by bringing together members of several lodges to practice jointly, promote exchange of good ideas and discourage unnecessary practices and bad habits. Ideas abound: teach deacons and stewards how to hold and carry a staff properly, teach chaplains how to time their prayers and direct them to

the candidate; teach proper voice techniques; teach speakers how to deal with unexpected situations (e.g., an improperly prepared EA candidate being presented to the Master). There are two areas where lodges of instruction could be especially helpful: demonstrating proper salutes and teaching correct pronunciation and delivery.

### **Due-guards and signs**

When I joined the Navy, I was told that salutes become sloppier in direct proportion to the rank of the officer giving them. In Freemasonry, however, where our only contention should be on “who best can work and best agree” (i.e., make their wall level and plumb), just the opposite should be true. Unfortunately it is not. Due-guards and signs should be given in a crisp, military manner, and accompanied by appropriate placement of the feet. Hands should be completely flat for all due-guards and signs, except for the moving FC sign. For some unknown reason, the FC degree presents special problems. There is a disturbing tendency in some lodges to give the FC due-guard with the one arm extended. This is not correct! The resulting gesture has no place in a Masonic lodge. All signs, including the FC sign, being p. signs, represent a ctg m and not a plg m. We are not talking dolls, nor are we throwing salt or catching flies.

### **Word pronunciation and delivery**

I am reminded of the story of the new Mason, who went home and told his wife of the three types of men to be found in a Masonic lodge, the walkers, the talkers and the holy men. The walkers walk around the lodge; the talkers talk while the walkers walk; and the holy men (they’re the ones with aprons trimmed in purple), they sit with their heads in their hands saying, “Oh my god.”

Of course it’s easy to preach from behind; its quite another when you’re sitting in the East with all eyes upon you. We all acquire bad habits – some very dear to the heart. In fact, certain passages sound better with a word pronounced, shall we say, “with improvement.” For example, I much prefer /DAY-i-tee/, /PILE-as-tur/, and /DYE-ves-ted/. All of which are wrong. Mis-pro-noun-cing the word “divest” is particularly popular because emphasizing the first syllable draws attention to the distinction between investing and divesting. Which proves the point that we must consider the message being conveyed not only by the words but by their delivery as well. Correct pronunciation is only a beginning, but it is a necessary one.

Before moving on, allow me to suggest three areas where a zero tolerance policy should be employed and absolute perfection demanded, the apron presentation, the “G” Lecture, and the presentation and description of the FPOF. These areas are the hearts of their degrees. I believe that anything less than perfection in their presentation is an insult both to the candidate and to the lodge.

So let’s pronounce the words right. When they’re said wrong, the speaker comes across as uncaring and unprepared. Let’s understand the meaning, too, because correct pronunciation will not save a speaker, who doesn’t know what he’s saying.

Some word usages (“stone,” “bourne,” “smote”) are commonly heard only in Masonic ritual. I would like to touch on these and the more common errors, which so often arise, but I must leave a more thorough study for the future. A number of problem words are listed in the Appendix.--- So much for ritual matters.

### **Myth conceptions**

12. Advise Masons that Freemasonry is not anti-Catholic although, depending whom you ask, the opposite may be true. In 1974 Cardinal Seper wrote to the bishops, stating that “The Sacred Congregation for the Doctrine of the Faith . . . has ruled that Canon 2335 no longer bars a Catholic from membership of Masonic groups. . . . And so a Catholic who joins the Freemasons is excommunicated only if the policy and actions of the Freemasons in his area are known to be hostile to the Church. . . .” But there have been developments since then. In 1983, a new Code of Canon Law was published, wherein Canon 2335 was replaced by Canon 1374, which only forbade membership in organizations which “plot against the Church” and removed the penalty of automatic

excommunication, replacing it with “a just penalty.” This is in conformity with Cardinal Seper’s interpretation. Shortly before the new Code was published, however, the Sacred Congregation, under a new Prefect, issued a pronouncement that Canon 1374 did not really affect the original policy. Although the pronouncement nullifies Cardinal Seper’s earlier ruling, it was issued prior to the effective date of the new canon. Accordingly, some dioceses are holding that the canon supersedes the ruling and are on that basis permitting Masonic membership. The point is that Masonry is neither “for” nor “against” any faith or denomination. The repeated need to say so is deeply troubling as it reveals, at best, questions arising out of on little or no capacity for independent thought.

13. Explain that the American Revolution was not a Masonic plot or conspiracy, nor was the Boston Tea Party and suggest that Masons curb their appetite for these stories. Certainly Masons participated in all these events, but if Masonry as an organization were to have done so it would be more cause for shame than jubilation. After all, General Arnold was also a Freemason.

### **Attending To The Gullible – And The Hateful**

14. Discuss the Morgan Affair, and explain the danger of ignoring anti-Masonic sentiments. Masons are charged not to let their zeal for the institution lead them into argument with those who through ignorance may ridicule it. But anti-Masons are not acting only out of ignorance. Their attacks are not ridicule but weapons specifically employed to destroy society’s greatest champion of freedom of conscience and universal morality. Masons should be strongly encouraged to study Ed King’s website at <http://Masonicinfo.com>. It provides a wealth of information about the anti-Mason and his motivations.

15. Explain that Freemasonry isn’t about secrets, and that “It’s a secret” is an unacceptable response to general questions about the Craft. Anti-Masons like to attack the strawman of Masonic “secrecy,” attempting thereby to neatly avoid the fact that our organization, like any other, is entitled to its privacy. As if we should be ashamed of restricting our meetings to members only. Make sure Masons understand that “the real secrets in Masonry are personal insights. They are secret not because we are pledged to conceal them, but because they cannot be truly communicated from one person to another.” Anti-Masons who think they’ve done something clever by publishing what they believe to be our “secrets” are truly a sad lot. An unexpected writer (Giovanni Casanova) put it this way:

“Men who plan only to be accepted as Freemasons with the purpose of coming to know the secret of the Order run great risk of growing old under the trowel without ever attaining their object. There is a secret, but it is so inviolable, that it has never been told nor confided to anyone. Those who grasp at the superficiality of things believe that the secret consists in words, signs and grips, or that in the final analysis it is the grand word of the last degree. A mistake!”

He who discovers the secret of Freemasonry, for they never know where they are finding it, will not arrive at that knowledge by reason of frequenting lodges. He gains it only by the strength of reflecting, of reasoning, of comparing, and of deducing. He will not confide it to his best friend in Freemasonry, for he knows that if that brother does not find it for himself as did he, the friend will not have the talent to extract the means to do so from what shall be said in his ear. \* \* \*

Those, who by dishonest indiscretion make no scruple of revealing, what is done in lodge have never revealed the essential, for, they do not know it, and if they have not known, truly they cannot reveal.

Unfortunately, Masonic history and many of the matters above are also not learned by “frequenting lodges.” But unlike the secrets of the apron, square, compasses and trowel, Masonic education can be taught – and we are the ones charged to do so.

### **Conclusion**

Six hundred years ago, an anonymous priest, for his Masonic education project, wrote:

“This good lord loved the craft full well,  
 and proposed to strengthen it, every dell;  
 For diverse faults that in the craft he found,  
 he set about into the land  
 After all the Masons of the craft,  
 to come to him full even straghtfe [straight].  
 For to amend these defaults all,  
 by good counsel, if it might fall,  
 An assembly then he could let make,  
 of diverse lords in their state --  
 Dukes, earls, and barons also;  
 knights, squires, and many mo.  
 (And the great burgesses of that city,  
 they were there all in their degree.)  
 These were there each one algate [everywhere, always],  
 to ordain for these Masons’ estate --  
 There they sought by their wit,  
 how [that] they might govern it:”  
 Fyftene artyculus they ther sow[g]ton,  
 and fyftene poyntys they wro[g]ton.

My fifteen points are nothing compared to the timeless message of the Regius Manuscript. But I flatter myself that my points also have their place. I’ve been told that the trouble with Masonic education of this type is that it never reaches the brethren who need it most – that is, the ones who believe that their long tenure in lodge equals knowledge of the Craft. This is alarming, because as the saying goes, “If you think education is expensive, try ignorance.” These harm us and no one else, and cry out for good counsel to be whispered in a brother’s ear.

I know that I’m preaching to the choir. But who else is there to call on? A more aggressive Masonic education program will work – if we work it. It is essential to raise the level of knowledge on which the average Mason stands. I pray the Craft to correct these misconceptions wherever found, to examine the content of our education programs, to continue being leaders and shining a brighter light into the darkness of unconsidered speculation and hearsay which too often passes for knowledge in our mystic circle.

#### BIBLIOGRAPHY

The bibliography has been incorporated into the notes.

The author thanks the following persons for their comments and suggestions, all of which have contributed to this work. In alphabetical order --

Wor. Bro. James G. Bennie, WM, Lodge Southern Cross No. 44, F. & A.M., British Columbia

Wor. Bro. Greg M. Glur, PM, Shiloh Lodge No. 1, A.F. & A.M., North Dakota

Bro. Karl-Gunnar Hultland, FC, Saints John Lodge Ultima Thule, Swedish Order of Freemasons

Lisa J. Kiser, Ph.D., Professor of Old English and Middle English Literature, English Linguistics, and History of the English Language, Ohio State University

Wor. Bro. Den Robinson, PM, Sant Beuno Lodge No. 6733, A.F. & A.M., England

Wor. Bro. Richard D. Snow, PM, New England Lodge No. 4, F. & A.M., Ohio; PM, Ohio Lodge of Research

Wor. Bro. Timothy B. Strawn, PM, New England Lodge No. 4, F. & A.M., Ohio

Wor. Bro. Robert L. Tucker, PM, Adoniram Lodge No. 517, F. & A.M., Ohio

Wor. Bro. Louis S. VanSlyck, PM, Trinity Lodge No. 710, F. & A.M. of Ohio; PM, Ohio Lodge of Research

W.Bro. Steven B. Van Slyck petitioned to Trinity Lodge, No. 710, F. & A.M. of Ohio, of which his father was a member, a little prior to age 21 and was initiated as a Lewis. He became an attorney at law with primary experience in trusts, estate planning, and probate, as well as consumer bankruptcy and a few other matters, and an associate member of the American Copy Editors Society. At the moment, he is general counsel for a small residential and commercial construction company in Columbus, Ohio, a Past Master of the Ohio Lodge of Research (2004), and editor of its Proceedings. W.Bro. VanSlyck serves the Grand Lodge of Ohio as a member of its Committee on Masonic Education and Information, and is the Senior Warden of New England Lodge No. 4, at Worthington. He is a Masonic Scholar and has detailed the areas, wherein, proper Masonic Education will help us evolve as better Masons. We are thankful to him for permitting us to post this article in this website. The learned author is a Past Master of Ohio Lodge of Research and is the Editor of its Transactions. He has in this article explained the fifteen points in which majority of brethren have to be educated. No doubt this article has been prepared with reference to the brethren in United States. Excepting the few points, which have particular relevance to our brethren in the United States, the other points have universal application. His advice, we are sure, if heeded, will make us better Masons