

SHALL WE BE FRANK?

BRIGHT MASONS AND LESSER LIGHT MASONS

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W*hat makes you a Mason?* That question should invoke the same answer from Masons, but it is one of those answers that is not explored in-depth, thus we find it meaning skewed. Comparable in slant is the phrase, *it is the internal, not the external that Masonry regards*, which so quickly becomes the refrain of those who defend and attempt to justify the range of casual to excessive-casual attire worn to Lodge.

Frank was a forty-year veteran member of the fraternity and long-ago, past master. The two lapels of his coat, always adorned with colorful pins attesting his membership in numerous appendant bodies, he was well-known for his uninvited prompts during ritual and other ceremonies and for carrying a copy of the by-laws of his Lodge in the breast pocket of his lapel-laden coat. He would, on occasion, pull from his apron case a list that was first published in 1899 of the 58 things H.B. Grant so self-confidently claimed to be the Landmarks of Freemasonry.[1] Frank, over the years, had scribbled notes on the back of the list of his additions that he often said he intended to publish one day and “set the Craft straight.”

In response to a motion one evening that involved his Lodge adopting a formal education program for candidates, Frank stood to address the Master and the motion. Given the floor he so often found difficult to give up, he began his remarks with his standard opening: “Let me explain how Freemasonry works.”

In keeping with his long-standing custom whenever he was given the floor, after fifteen minutes or so of his denunciation of the idea and motion, he finally concluded his remarks. He summarized what he said as the supporting evidence on which he based his scolding. He began that summary by saying, “It seems you all need reminding that what makes a man a Mason is going through the instruction provided in our ritual and takes the obligation. Once that happens, there is no education program that *makes* a man a Mason because he already is one!”

In keeping with another long-standing custom of the lodge regarding most anything to which Frank voiced opposition, the motion quickly and overwhelmingly passed without further discussion in support of, or opposition to, his comments.

Unwittingly, Frank’s remarks that evening contributed to the breadth and depth of the new education program throughout the following decade. He, unfortunately, failed to grasp the critical, fundamental essence and the very crux of the issue and matter at hand—much like many Masons have done about other things regarding Freemasonry and especially about education that helps prevent or at least corral crux-missing thinking.

Frank was correct when he said that taking the obligation does, at least as far as the rules go, make a newly admitted member entitled to call himself a Mason and to be thought of by other members as a brother. However, there is more to just taking the obligation and being made a Mason under the rules.

For the obligation to make a man a Mason, he must first live up to what he has sworn to do in that obligation and keep his word that he will do so.

Frank was the archetypal, mechanical Mason.[2] He knew the rules and could quote lengthy passages from the constitution (as well as from Grant's alleged list of Landmarks). Still, the Masonic knowledge he (like all Masons) are charged with making a daily advancement of was, despite his forty years as a member, meager. His confidence that his knowledge was not meager is what carried him through his Masonic career in the company of many whose knowledge was no more significant than Frank's.

The fraternity can make as many members as they possibly can and has tried to do that on several occasions in its history, but men cannot be *made* Masons by simply being ushered through our ritual and taking the obligation. There are elements to improve the chance he will *become* a Freemason.

The first element is ensuring the right men are admitted into the ranks of the fraternity. The second is ensuring the ritual of all three degrees are delivered competently and followed with something more than hurried memory work that betters assures a candidate understands the intricacies of the degrees through which he is ushered (which is usually too quickly). The third, once all the degree work is completed, is ensuring that the work of the Lodge holds the interest of the candidate and is there is opportunity for the candidate to become active and inspired to remain involved in Freemasonry so that he can also do what he said he came to Freemasonry to do: to learn, and to subdue his passions through Freemasonry.

Frank's vintage position about this and other aspects of Freemasonry is but an heirloom of what many in his and previous generations of Masons did not always receive: a fundamental Masonic education beyond ritual.

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There are many reasons why, and those reasons are sufficiently addressed in many writings, including valid Masonic research. But to know those things require some reading, or, at the minimum, being around those who do read more than just about the rules—rules which are indeed important to know as well, of course, but do not alone transform a member into a Freemason. All rules and no study of Freemasonry makes a member... well, like Frank: mechanical and ignorant about Freemasonry.

Ignorance has to do with a lack of knowledge, not capability. Frank, although not unlettered, much less stupid, was ignorant under the generally accepted orthodox definition in America: *one who lacks knowledge*. The reason Frank was ignorant was that he lacked knowledge about that which it was his duty, a duty to which he agreed of his own free will and accord to have; which he is under a moral obligation by virtue of taking that obligation to have; and which, under the definition of a Master's Wage, he is paid to have.

Frank, like many members, wrapped their view of Freemasonry around rules and threaded its purpose through many carefully worded regulations that govern the administration of its precepts that generations believed were essential so to ensure the life and care of Freemasonry.

Some rules and regulations are, no doubt, essential. Some, however, have proven unwieldy

and unconstructive because they have not proven to advance the life and care of Freemasonry or actually

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ensure that each man who is escorted through the instruction in the ritual, then takes the obligation, is a Mason by anything but name only.

No one argues that organizations, large or small, do not require rules, but who agrees that a person charged to write a detailed manual on making, assembling, and caring for a Swiss watch is expected to do that well without knowing quite a bit about how to best do it or had actually done it. If as much effort was put into knowing as much about Freemasonry as the rules surrounding it, perhaps generations may have passed on that mindset with at least a better balance between the two. But Frank, as he had done many times before and after that meeting, spewed only the storyline, as it were, that was passed on to him by the previous generation.

One would certainly think that it should be a self-evident proposition that members of the Order are not ignorant of the Craft in which they are a member. Arms may go up in protest, and eyebrows and backs arched at the very thought that any Mason might reflect ignorance about Freemasonry. Unfortunately, that thought is not a new one and can be found in the writings about the fraternity for nearly two hundred years.

While we would not call a physician ignorant who lacks knowledge of how to design and construct a twenty-story building, we would certainly think of him as ignorant if he lacked knowledge of medicine. We would not call an architect and engineer ignorant who lacks knowledge about how to perform the most complicated medical surgeries but would if he lacks knowledge about his own profession because he, like the physician, is under both legal and a moral obligation to have that knowledge.

To competently manage the affairs of the fraternity, and consequently Freemasonry, there must be competent leaders who know both the rules and understand Freemasonry, and leaders all come from within our lodges.

During the process of being made a Master Mason, a man more than once pledges himself to be and do certain things that comprise what is meant when he says what *makes* him a Mason is his obligation. Once he takes the obligation under his own free will and accord, he is henceforth, under Masonic law and the moral obligation, to possess himself of whatever knowledge those pledges in our ritual and lectures require of him.

Scholarship, erudition, Masonic research in the nature of these things do not belong to the substance of Masonic membership and must forever be for the few who have a taste for them, who have the leisure, the opportunity, and the call. No Mason is required to have or could have all

knowledge about Freemasonry, but it is necessary for him to have the knowledge required by his station as a Mason. If he lacks that particular knowledge, he is ignorant.

To competently manage the affairs of the fraternity, and consequently Freemasonry, there must be competent leaders who know both the rules and understand Freemasonry. Those leaders must all come from within our Lodges. To carry on such activities successfully calls for various kinds of knowledge, and it is necessary to have knowledge of both areas. When that necessary level of knowledge is out of balance in the fraternity, it becomes as conspicuous as a brass band at a funeral—except to those who have not cultivated the knowledge that provides them the capacity to see it.

It is not unjust or a harsh verdict upon such a man to call him ignorant if he does not have knowledge for and of such things because he is under the obligation that he took of his own free will and accord to have it.

He gave his word. If a man is not willing to possess himself of that necessary knowledge, he ought never to petition for membership in the fraternity.[3]

THE BRIGHT OR LESSER LIGHTS OF MASONRY

For anyone who seeks to avoid forms of expression thought to offend sensibilities, even when it may be true, the following is offered in consideration.

We know that a visitor not known to other Masons in a lodge requires the visitor to prove himself a Mason before he is allowed to sit in an open lodge of Masons. If he cannot do that, he is not admitted. The magnanimous, big-hearted, or lazy brothers charged with trying a stranger supposes that whatever the stranger seems to know about Masonry is *good enough* and then allows his admittance, has not lived up to this word. And frankly, if that *good enough* person allowed in the Lodge is truly a fellow member but can only produce what is good enough to convince another Mason he is a member, he has not lived up to his word either.

As far back as the early 1800s, the *good enough* man admitted to Lodge has often been referred to as a “Lesser Light of Masonry.” Those subjected to a proper due trial and strict examination and passed all standards and then admitted into Lodge were considered and referred to as a “Bright Mason.”

Of course, that was not the highest bar to set, and it probably should have been higher because the bright Mason then only needed to answer specific questions about the degrees, provide the correct grip (handshake), or some other sign that proved he was a member of a regularly chartered lodge. But of course, to raise that bar, the Mason asking questions beyond those things would have to know the answers.

As written about in 1899:

The phrase [bright Mason”] is usually applied to one who is well posted in the lectures of the various degrees and can communicate them without hesitation and correctly. This requires, of course, a retentive memory and a readiness to learn. But it must be remembered that Masonry does not wholly consist of ceremonies and ritual. We have seen men who could confer blue lodge degrees give the lectures complete without missing the smallest word, but who could hardly be regarded as a bright Mason. The brightness of Masonry lies beneath the veil of allegory and the surface of symbolism and takes hold of the heart with its tender sympathies and affections. The brightness of Masonry is not confined to the Lodge-room but shines from the soul in the life and actions of the man.[4]

Ignorant Masons, or Masons who might fit the category of (if you prefer) a “lessor Light of Masonry member,” has always been part of the fraternity. When the fraternity waters itself down from generation to generation due to different standards and emphasis placed on guarding the West Gate and practices offered in the Lodge room that passes for Freemasonry, what else could reasonably be expected to happen.

The good news is that no man who becomes a member has to allow himself to be or viewed as ignorant or a lesser light of Masonry member. Even if his Lodge does not provide what he seeks to move beyond the beginner level, there are many brothers and other lodges someplace who can. Moreover, there is no lack of quality Masonic materials to do what seems unimaginable to many Masons: read. The incredible number of

valuable resources available on the Internet alone can help a man become a Bright Mason. That is unless he chooses to embrace the notion that all required to be a Mason is to take an obligation no matter if he lives up to his word or not.

Masonic literature has told us many times that Masonic education always enters into most solutions to problems facing the fraternity. The purpose of such education has never been to make learned scholars out of every Mason but rather to guarantee that Masons everywhere shall have the knowledge of Freemasonry that is necessary for not only the fraternity to sustain itself, but to best ensure the perpetuity of the Craft.

Shall we be Frank, or shall we live up to our word and engage in the labor to which we have obligated ourselves to pursue and consistently practice?

[1] Book Of Constitutions of The Grand Lodge of Kentucky, 1995, 1Introduction, A-2, "Landmarks and Ancient Charges," Prepared by H. B. Grant, and Published by Authority, Second Edition, 264 pp., 1889.

[2] Dan M. Kemble, "The Mechanical Mason: Constructing the Culture of "Can't," *The Rubicon Masonic Society Transactions*, vol.1, Lexington, KY, 2022.

[3] H.L. Haywood, *Masonic Ignorance, A New Variation On An Old Theme*, Missouri Lodge of Research, May 1951.

[4] "The Bright Mason," *The Freemason's Chronicle*, March 18, 1899, 5.