

WHAT IS IT THAT WE ARE PASSING ON?

Dan M. Kemble

Past Master, William O. Ware Lodge of Research, Kentucky

Presented at the Grand Lodge of Kentucky District 18 Meeting on April 30, 2022

As children, many of us played a game in school called, “Pass It On.” Some of us knew the game by different names. Some of us knew it as, “Gossip,” while others of us knew it as, “Chinese Whispers.” Regardless of the name, the game was almost always played in the same way. Children would arrange themselves in rows or lines, and the first would whisper something to the next person in line, then say, “pass it on!” By the time whatever it was that was being “passed on” reached the last person in line, it was generally something quite different than the original statement uttered by the first person in line. The amusement of the game was to see just to what extent the original message became distorted as it reached its final destination.

Freemasonry, as we experience it, has been organized for nearly 305 years now. Over the course of that time, a significant number of facts relating to Freemasonry have been distorted in many different ways.

Let’s look at just one example:

Many men here are Past Masters. Most Kentucky Lodges use the Installation Ceremony from Henry Pirtle’s Kentucky Monitor as the monitorial guide for their annual installation of officers. During the ceremony, certain questions are propounded to the Master-elect, and an affirmative answer is required in each instance.

One of the questions is this:

“Do you admit that it is not in the power of any man, of (sic.) body of men, to make innovations in the body of Masonry? Ans.: I do.”

And thus, from year to year and from generation to generation, we pass on the notion that innovations in Masonry are forbidden.

Contrast that statement, however, with the language found in Anderson’s Constitutions of 1738:

“It is not in the Power of any person, or Body of men, to make any alteration, or Innovation in the Body of Masonry without the consent first obtained of the Annual Grand Lodge.”

Notice the last clause in the preceding sentence. Clearly, Anderson believed that innovations in the body of Masonry were permissible, provided that they occurred with the consent of the Annual Grand Lodge.

Anderson’s Constitutions are the foundation of all existing Masonic law. As we trace our Masonic lineage back to the founders, we arrive at the Grand Lodge of England as founded in 1717, and Anderson’s Constitutions of 1723 and 1738.

So how did we make the leap from Anderson's Constitutions of 1738, in which innovations in the body of Masonry were within the contemplation of the leading Masons of the day, provided that they were made with the consent of the Grand Lodge, to the ceremonies contained in Pirtle's Kentucky Monitor of 1921 and the same ceremonies and viewpoints that we pass on today?

To be clear, this is in no way a criticism of Henry Pirtle. Henry Pirtle's contributions to Kentucky Freemasonry, and to Freemasonry in general, are substantial and he is worthy of the high esteem in which he is regarded. Pirtle was a genuinely admirable Freemason, and it is unfortunate that contemporary Kentucky Freemasons, as well as Freemasons from other jurisdictions, are not better acquainted with the entire body of his work.

In the Kentucky Monitor, Pirtle was merely passing on what had been passed to him. Pirtle's Monitor contains the same language as does H. B. Grant's Vest Pocket Trestle Board and Rob Morris's edition of the Webb Monitor.

Let us return, again, to Anderson's Constitutions of 1723 and 1738. Discussion about innovations in the body of Masonry were already a topic of discussion at that early time. It can be argued that the establishment of the Grand Lodge of England in 1717 was an innovation, as none of the Gothic Constitutions, which served as the bases for Anderson's works, provided for the creation of a Grand Lodge.

Further, by 1730, Lodges in England were working what can only be called the greatest innovation in the history of Masonry – the Master Mason Degree.

Prior to the middle 1720s, organized Freemasonry consisted of two Degrees – the Entered Apprentice and the Fellow Craft. The introduction of the Master Mason Degree, around 1725, proved to be enormously popular and was the subject of Samuel Prichard's sensational expose, *Masonry Dissected*, published in 1730.

In fact, the history of Freemasonry is littered with examples of innovations in the body of Masonry, and Anderson, and the other founders of the premier Grand Lodge, recognized the reality that such innovations would occur (or may be necessary), and wrote into the first constitutions the safeguard that innovations required the consent of the Grand Lodge.

How, then, did the distorted view that no innovations may be made in the body of Masonry come about?

The language "it is not in the power of any man, or body of men, to make innovations in the body of Masonry" first appears in William Preston's *Illustrations of Masonry* published in 1772. Preston, the father of the ritual used through Freemasonry today, simply omitted the words, "without the consent of the Annual Grand Lodge" from his ritual ceremonies.

As Preston's work spread, and as it was later adapted by Thomas Smith Webb and used in the United States, the distorted view that no innovations are permissible in the body of Masonry has been handed down from generation to generation and has become the perception of the majority. The notion that no innovations may be made in the body of Masonry has taken on the permanence of "that's the way we've always done it."

Ironically, the idea that no innovations are permissible in the body of Masonry is, itself, an innovation!

Before proceeding, I want to make clear that this presentation really isn't about innovations. It's about how, over the course of the centuries, what we have passed on from generation to generation has become distorted.

Consider, if you will, the inconsistencies found in proficiency examinations across our jurisdiction. Although our Constitution offers certain guidelines with respect to proficiencies, ultimately the determination of an acceptable proficiency examination is left to the discretion of the Lodge, and what one Lodge considers a suitable proficiency may be radically different from the manner in which another Lodge, even in the same District, may define a suitable proficiency.

The inconsistencies found in our proficiency examinations illustrate that, from Lodge to Lodge and from generation to generation, we are inconsistent in what it is that we pass on to our membership.

In his famous 1875 essay, "Reading Masons and Masons Who Do Not Read," Albert Gallatin Mackey closed with these words, "The ultimate success of Masonry depends on the intelligence of her disciples."

What measures are within our power to address Brother Mackey's point of producing informed and intelligent Masons?

It is within the ability of every Lodge represented here to devise and implement a structured Masonic Education program, which begins with the petitioner, even before he has been elected to membership, and continues with the newly raised Master Mason beyond the mere memory work required to obtain a proficiency card.

Why is it necessary to begin with the petitioner before his election to membership in Freemasonry? This is the opportunity for both sides to establish their expectations for the upcoming process. As Lodges, at the very least, we need to make clear to the petitioner what it is that will be expected of him in terms of time commitment, financial commitment, attendance and attire. We also need to listen to our petitioners, to understand their expectations about what it is they desire to receive from us. In some instances, one or both parties may be unable to fulfill the expectations that are expressed. It is better to know that before the initiatory process begins, rather than after it is underway.

Following the election of the candidate, but prior to initiation, an orientation session should be scheduled that prepares the candidate mentally for the initiatory experience. A discussion of the history of the Lodge would be appropriate, along with a chance to meet its principal officers. This is an opportunity to establish trust with the candidate, and to again reinforce the solemnity of the obligations he is about to assume.

Following each of the degrees, in addition to the required memory work, which is in no way to be minimized, there is the opportunity for in-depth explanation of the philosophy behind each of the degrees, the practical application of the working tools in the life of a Freemason, a review of the different symbols contained in the several lectures and an overview of the manner in which our Degrees build upon each other.

It must be recognized that ritual, and the memorization of ritual, is essential to the Masonic experience. Quoting ritual, however, does not serve to explain ritual, and one of the purposes of the structured Masonic Education program is go beyond the ritual to examine the ideas and philosophies that shaped it.

The structured Masonic Education program should also include a review of our Grand Lodge Constitution, our Lodge By-Laws, and the standard order of business that use at our stated communications.

What could we hope to accomplish by establishing a structured Masonic Education program? First, we can provide uniformity to our members, that the information presented is consistent from generation to generation.

Second, we can ground men in the history and philosophy of Freemasonry. By providing this level of education, we can prepare men to actually practice Freemasonry, engaging in it as an active process, rather than viewing it as a passive event.

Finally, we can remove some of the distortions that have occurred in Freemasonry over the last three centuries. Freemasons in the 21st Century have unprecedented access to books, journals, proceedings and on-line resources. Unlike our Brothers of only a hundred years ago, we really have no excuse for passing on anything other than factual information about our Craft. By offering a factually accurate portrayal of Freemasonry to our membership, we allow Freemasonry to define itself, rather than being defined by the uninformed.

Does a structured Masonic Education program work? The limited data available suggests that it does. It has been suggested by Masons in Kansas, Kentucky, Ohio and Oklahoma that Lodges implementing a structured Masonic Education program have retention rates above 60%.

For at least the last sixty years in American Freemasonry, from the time that membership rates began to decline, we have focused our efforts almost exclusively on getting more men into Masonry. The structured Masonic Education program flips that focal point; and the focus becomes getting more Masonry into men.

How can you implement a structured Masonic Education program in your Lodge? Go back to your Lodges and begin to have discussions within the Lodge. Prepare a list of the things that a man should know before he becomes a member of your Lodge. Prepare another list of the things that he should learn as he progresses through the Degrees.

Visit other Lodges that have implemented a structured Masonic Education program, and ask them what parts of their program work best, and ask them to identify the parts with which they have struggled.

At the end of process, let it be the decision of your Lodge as to when and how to implement a structured Masonic Education program. To have a commitment to such a program that will prove long-lasting will require the commitment of the whole Lodge. It is the Lodge, as a whole, that must decide what it is that will and will not be taught. Don't let it be the decision of one man, or a small group of men. Those efforts, however noble, are doomed to failure. Quality Masonic education embraces many different viewpoints and perspectives. Exposure to the spectrum of opinion

encourages men to think, and, ultimately, grow as Masons. And, by the way, that sort of environment is exactly what made Freemasonry so popular in the 18th Century!

The decision to implement a structured Masonic Education program, once adopted by the Lodge, then becomes a part of your Lodge's culture; and, within a few years, becomes, "the way we've always done it."

Brother Mackey was correct when he wrote that the future of Freemasonry depends on the intelligence of its members. We have within our abilities the opportunity to produce members who are educated and intelligent in the art and science of Freemasonry. In doing so, we can greatly reduce the likelihood that what we pass on to our succeeding generations is distorted. We can also hope to clarify some of the distortion of the past.

A commitment to the creation of a structured Masonic Education program is an idea that your Lodge can adopt right now. Pass it on!