

Extremism Versus Freedom

A Masonic Call To Action

James Bernard Wilkinson

Bro. James Bernard Wilkinson, 33ø, is Senior Judge in Virginia 's Thirteenth Judicial Circuit and a member of Bon Air Baptist Church in Richmond, Virginia. He has taught Sunday School for forty years and served as Clerk of his former church for thirty consecutive years. Bro. Wilkinson is a member of the Lodge of Strict Observance, No. 207, Richmond, VA, and this year, 1992, he is the Grand Junior Warden of the Grand Lodge of Virginia, and he serves the Scottish Rite of Freemasonry as Orient Personal Representative in Virginia and as Secretary of the Childhood Language Center in Richmond. – Editor

Foreword To Extremism Versus Freedom – A Masonic Call To Action

Once again Freemasonry has come under attack from a fundamentalist religious group. In this particular instance a powerful group of fundamentalists within the Southern Baptist Convention demanded an "investigation" of Freemasonry by its Interfaith Witness Department.

One of the proponents of this "inquiry" has already stated publicly that unless the report condemns Freemasonry it is to be ignored and a resolution condemning Freemasonry is to be acted upon immediately. In fact proponents of this action have already developed a "purification ritual" which they will demand of all Baptist Churches who have had cornerstones laid by the Masonic Fraternity in the past.

Religious intolerance is not new to the Masonic Fraternity, and the intent of this Short Talk Bulletin is twofold. first, to help the Mason concerned about this particular situation to respond if he so chooses and, secondly, to address all religious attacks on Freemasonry by showing how Masons can respond.

This Short Talk Bulletin is only one of the responses by the Masonic Fraternity. Another response that is being prepared and we would strongly urge you to look for and read as soon as it becomes available, is the February 1993 issue of The Scottish Rite Journal, Southern Jurisdiction. The entire issue will be devoted to the discussion of religious freedom and the vital role Freemasonry has played, not only in its development but also in its continuation.

The Masonic Service Association has been asked to serve as a clearing house for information concerning how we can respond to these attacks, and we will be attempting to gain information from all of the Grand Lodges, as well as other Masonic sources, as to what actions they may be taking.

If you have any questions or comments on this subject, please don't hesitate to let us know. The address where you may reach us is: 8120 Fenton Street, Silver Spring, MD 20910-4785. –
Editor

Extremism Versus Freedom – A Masonic Call To Action

Freemasonry today again faces an age-old antagonist – religious extremism. In the past, our Craft has always defended its basic commitment to freedom of conscience. Masonry's dedication is to each person's right to decide matters of faith for himself. Freemasonry leaves each person to embrace the creed of his choice and teaches toleration. All men of good character who believe in a Supreme Being are welcome in Freemasonry. There they are encouraged to live according to the tenets of their own faith.

Our Masonic position is simple: all men and women have the right to be free. They have a right to think for themselves in all matters civil, political, and religious.

Today, however, divisive sectarianism is gaining strength. Within some denominations extremists are demanding new rules which would force many Masons to choose between his church, synagogue, or other religious membership and his fraternal membership. The most recent instance is the creation by the June 1992 Southern Baptist Convention of a special "investigation" of Freemasonry by its Interfaith Witness Department. The one-year study is to determine if Freemasonry is compatible with the Christian faith.

That, in itself, is not a concern. All thinking Masons know Freemasonry is compatible with all the great faiths of the world, including the Christian faith. We also know any objective, unbiased study on the subject will prove this to be true.

Freemasonry's main concern is that, whatever the report to the Convention may be, it will be twisted to condemn Freemasonry. Headlines such as "America's Largest Protestant Denomination Expels Masons" can benefit no one. Also, local Baptist churches, if forced to oust Freemasons, will lose their traditional autonomy in addition to membership. Worse yet for our fraternity, we can expect several other mainline denominations to consider similar condemnations, however ludicrous, of Freemasonry.

The result could be a devastating blow to Freemasonry. Minimally, it is estimated, we could lose 20% of our present members, not to mention the loss of prospective members. We should not forget that the anti-Masonic furor of the 1826-56 period resulted in Masonic lodges losing as many as 75% of their members.

Clearly, all caring and thoughtful Masons today must take the threat of religious extremism seriously. We must get back to our Masonic roots and again become outspoken champions of toleration and religious freedom. We must let the world know that Masonry is not the enemy of any church, but its servant and ally. Religion and Freemasonry; both feed the spirit in different ways.

We must be absolutely certain our own membership is well informed. There is a real danger that some of our brethren who are subjected to anti-Masonic influences or personally harassed by anti-Masons in their own church will feel torn between two seemingly absolute alternatives and, consequently, anguished enough to consider demitting as an escape from the dilemma.

To maintain a strong and committed membership, Masonic leadership in all branches of the family of Freemasonry should help create an awareness campaign about Freemasonry and religious extremism, including the present situation in the Southern Baptist Convention.

So what can be done? Where to start? How to make a difference?

Consider the following suggestions:

1. Awareness seminars could be conducted at the Grand Lodge, Masonic District, and Valley levels. Invite all, Masons and non Masons alike. Have a knowledgeable speaker or panel to provide information on religious extremism and to offer answers to the commonly raised anti-Masonic claims.
2. Distribute relevant brochures to all Masons. Suggestions are "Conscience and the Craft" (Guthrie Valley, PO Box 70, Guthrie, OK 73044); "Freemasonry and Religion" and the February 1993 issue of The Scottish Rite Journal (The Supreme Council, 33ø, 1733 16th St., NW, Washington, DC 20009); or other resource materials available from the Masonic Service Association (8120 Fenton Street, Silver Spring, MD 20910).
3. Hold open houses at local Masonic Lodges and Scottish Rite Temples. Invite pastors, ministers, rabbis, and priests. Have a qualified Mason present to respond to questions.
4. Arrange meetings with the parents and members of DeMolay, Rainbow Girls, and Job's Daughters. Young people are among the most vulnerable targets for anti-Masonic propaganda.
5. Local Masonic Organizations should make every effort to increase their visibility and to make the general public aware of the good work done by Freemasonry's many philanthropies.
6. To the extent possible, each Grand Lodge should appoint a spokesman to respond to all media and public inquiries and, whenever possible, to appear on radio talk shows and other public occasions to explain the Fraternity's position on the issues raised by any anti-Masonic group.

7. Every Mason should write a simple statement that he has never found any conflict between Freemasonry and his faith. Letters should be mailed to the leaders of his own church or, given the present instance of the Southern Baptist Convention 's "investigation" of Freemasonry, to the following:

Dr. Ed Young, President Southern Baptist Convention 6400 Woodway Houston, TX 77057

Dr. Morris Chapman, Exec. Sec./Treas. Executive Committee 901 Commerce St., Suite 750 Nashville, TN 37203

Dr. Mark Coppenger SBC, Public Relations Office 901 Commerce St., Suite 750 Nashville, TN 37203

8. Every Mason who has both his faith and his Masonry in his heart, and who is confident that both bring substance to his spiritual nature in a noncompeting way, should strive to become a representative to the governing body, local and/or national, of his denomination. Baptist Masons concerned about the Southern Baptist Convention, for instance, should consult their conscience and, possibly, become messenger-delegates to their church's meeting in Houston, Texas, at the Astrodome, June 14-17, 1993.

Unless Masons make a concerted effort to be represented in their denominations, certain fundamentalists will continue to attempt to dominate church decisions and work toward such extremism as condemnation of Freemasonry.

You Can Make A Difference

Take practical steps, as outlined above, to bring Freemasonry to the forefront in a positive way. Most of all, become even more active in your denomination and stand tall for Freemasonry!

In the charge given to a newly raised Mason, he is told to be faithful and active in his church, synagogue, or other place of worship and that he should always practice good citizenship. God, country, and honor should always be our cornerstones.

Our Masonic forefathers struggled to establish the great American principle of religious toleration. Now all Freemasons are called upon to live actively and publicly for this same great tradition.

STB - December 1992