

Ritual Differences

Unknown

An experience in freemasonry usually upsetting to the newly-raised brother is his first visit to a lodge in another jurisdiction than his own. Having carefully been taught a certain ritual, in all probability with positive emphasis upon the necessity of being “letter perfect,” he learns with a distinct shock that the ritual in other States differs from his own, and these differ each from the other.

If he converses with those “well informed brethren who will always be as ready to give as you will be to receive instruction” he is more than apt to be met with a puzzled, “I don’t know, I’m sure, just why they are different from us, but of course. ours is correct.”

The riddle becomes much plainer as the neophyte studies Masonic history – but, alas, many never open a Masonic book! Yet divergences in ritual cannot be understood without some historical background. It is necessary to understand, for instance, that Freemasonry came to this country, some time prior to 1731, at a time when English ritual was in a process of formation. We did not receive our Masonry from one central source. but from several; nor did we obtain it as a whole. Several different localities, Massachusetts, Pennsylvania, Virginia) received Freemasonry from across the sea and from them our forms and ceremonies radiated to other sections. The schism in the first Grand Lodge in England (1753) resulted in two Grand Lodges; the “Ancients” (the younger, schismatic body) and the “Moderns” (the older. original Grand Lodge). Each had its own ritual; our rituals sometimes lean to one, sometimes to the other, and often to both. Literal ritualism is comparatively a modern matter; and “mouth to ear” in the early days meant nothing more than giving of information, not transmitting it in a set form of words. Most of our Grand Lodges have been formed by a union of particular Lodges, many of which received each its ritual from a different source, with the result that the ritual finally adopted is a combination of several. And finally, Grand Lodges have not infrequently changed, added to and taken from their own rituals, either as matter of legislation or by the easier course (in early days) of adopting with little or no question the variations suggested by positive minded ritualists, Grand Lecturers, Custodians of the Work, ritual committees and so on. Some of these, unfortunately, had little or no Masonic background, and changed and altered, added and subtracted with no better reason than “this seems much better to us!”

Certain fundamentalists are to all intents and purposes the same in every one of our forty-nine Grand Jurisdictions. All American Lodges have a Master and two Wardens, a Secretary and Treasurer, an Alter with the V.S.L. and the other Great Lights, three degrees; unanimous ballot required; make Masons only of men; have the same Substitute Word given in the same way; are tiled; have a ceremony of opening and closing. To some extent all dramatize and exemplify the Master's Degree, although the amount of drama and exemplification differs widely.

But beyond these and a few other simple essentials are wide variations. Aprons are worn one way in one degree in one Jurisdiction and another way in the same degree in another. Some Jurisdictions have more officers in a Lodge than others. In some Jurisdictions Lodges open and close on the Master Mason's degree; others on the First degree; others only in the degree which it to be "worked." Lesser Lights are grouped closely about the Altar, in the stations of the Master and Wardens. In some Lodges the I.P.M. (immediate Past Master) plays an important part, as in England. Other Lodges know him not Some Lodges have Inner Guards and two Masters of Ceremonies – others will have none of these.

Dividing, lettering, syllabing are almost as various in practice as the Jurisdictions. Obligations show certain close similarities in some requirements; but what is a part of the obligation in one jurisdiction may be merely an admonition in another, and "vice versa."

Discovering all this (and much more) the thoughtful initiate is apt to wonder why it is deemed so important that he memorize his own particular "work" so closely; when he travels he finds that what he knows as familiar words and forms and phrases are strange to the Lodges he visits. Not is this the place to ague for purity of the ritual as taught. There are good and sufficient reasons why we should hand on to our sons and their sons the ritual as we received it – if only to preserve without further alteration and change that which was formed by the fathers. Suffice it that while uniformity in work within a Jurisdiction is fairly well established as good American Masonic practice, it is not universal. there are several "workings" for instance, permitted in English Lodges, and even in some American Jurisdictions ("vide" Connecticut) not all Lodges use the same ritual.

The reasons for all this are so involved, complex, and cover such a long period; that a complete understanding is difficult even for the student willing to read the enormous amount of history and authority which may make it plain. Briefly, and in general, the matter becomes clearer if we visualize our sources of ritual.

We received our Masonry from:

The Mother Grand Lodge of England	1717-1753
The Grand Lodge of the "Ancients"	1753-1813
The Grand Lodge of the "Moderns"	1753-1813
The United Grand Lodge	1813 and on -

The Grand Lodge of Ireland 1724- and on -

The Grand Lodge of Scotland 1736 and on -

and From the Pre-Grand Lodge era of Lodges of England, Ireland and (or) Scotland.

Unfortunately for the historian, this list does not signify six or seven different but “pure” forms. The ritual of the original Grand Lodge changed as it flowed, through many years after 1717. The Grand Lodges of “Ancients” and “Moderns both made alterations in ritual so that rival members of each body found it impossible to make themselves known Masonically in the other. Ireland and Scotland were, and are, as different as Pennsylvania and California. From pre-Grand Lodges members came to this country to form themselves into Lodges without Warrant or Charter (as was the custom in early days). A dozen men, bringing “what they remembered of the” ritual they heard when “made,” to form a Lodge, would naturally include in their ritual a little of one original source, some phrases from another beginning, a paragraph from a third wellspring, and so on.

The Mother Grand Lodge ritual (1717 to 1753) was not the ritual of the United Grand Lodge which came into existence in 1813, when the two parts of the original Mother Grand Lodge (“Ancients” and “Moderns”) again came together. The United Grand Lodge, or Grand Lodge of Reconciliation, formed its ritual from the best of the divergent rituals of the “Ancients” and the “Moderns.”

Thus, Lodges in this country which received ritual, in any and all states of purity or impurity, from either of these several sources, would differ decidedly each from the other.

Come we now to the spread of Masonry in the thirteen colonies, and later, through the forty-eight states, territories, and the District of Columbia. To write even one paragraph of Masonic history of ritual in so many subdivisions would make this Bulletin unreadably long. But a few high lights may be noted.

From our primary American sources of ritual, in one way or another all other American Grand Jurisdictions, in part at least, received their “work;” Massachusetts, which at first sent forth what must have been at least an approximation of the work of the original Mother Grand Lodge, though her ritual today is derived from both “Moderns” and “Ancients;” Pennsylvania and Virginia, both giving forth individual variants of a combination of “Modern” and “Ancient,” and North Carolina, almost purely “Modern.”

In 1915 Dean Roscoe Pound showed how various were the next groups of States which received their rituals from the first four American sources. He developed that Maine derived from Massachusetts since the fusion; Vermont derived from the Grand Lodge of “Ancients” in Massachusetts before the fusion; Ohio derived from Massachusetts, from Connecticut, a strictly “Modern” Jurisdiction, and from Pennsylvania; Indiana derived from Ohio and Kentucky, which later represents Virginia after the fusion, Michigan derived from the “Ancient” Grand

Lodge of Canada and from New York, which since the Revolution was a Strictly “Ancient” Jurisdiction; Kentucky derived from Virginia; Tennessee derived from North Carolina, a purely “Modern” Jurisdiction; Alabama derived from North Carolina, from South Carolina and from Tennessee, thus representing Virginia and North Carolina; Louisiana derived from South Carolina, from Pennsylvania and from France; Florida derived from Georgia and from South Carolina; Missouri derived from Pennsylvania and from Tennessee, representing therefore, the fusion in Pennsylvania and the “Modern Masonry” of North Carolina; Illinois derived from Kentucky and so represents Virginia; and the District of Columbia derived Maryland (a fusion of “Modern Masonry from Massachusetts and from England direct, with the “Ancient Masonry” from Pennsylvania), and from Virginia.

The further west we go, the more we find a mixture of sources, complicated rather than simplified by such matters as the splitting of the Grand Lodge of Dakota into the Grand Lodge the of South Dakota and North Dakota, when these two States were formed, and the formation of the Grand Lodge of California, which drew its work from many different sources. California Lodge No.13, of the District of Columbia, was formed for the purpose of carrying Masonry to the Golden Gate at the time of the gold rush. That Lodge is now No.1 on the California Grand Lodge Register. But California’s ritual is not more similar to the District of Columbia working than that of any other State, since the District Lodge was but one of several which formed the Grand Lodge of California.

There have been certain unifying influences; the Baltimore Convention of 1843, the conclusions of which were adopted in whole or in part by several American Grand Jurisdictions, and the work of Bob Morris and his conservators, which, despite its chilly reception by many Grand Jurisdictions, undoubtedly left its impression on American ritual. A third unifying influence has been the tremendous impress made on almost all American Jurisdictions by Thomas Smith Webb, and Jeremy Cross, plainly evident in the exoteric paragraphs printed in many State Monitors or Manuals. A fourth has been the honest desire and strenuous efforts of many Grand Lodges through District Deputies, Grand Lecturers, Schools of Instruction and similar machinery, to preserve what they have in its supposedly ancient perfection. But by the time these latter were in operation, ritual was more or less fixed. Because of the reverence of the average Mason for what he is taught, and his fierce resentment of any material change in that which he learns, rituals and degree forms, ceremonies and practices, usages and customs continue to be what he believes them to have been “from time immemorial” even when sober fact shows that they have an antiquity of (in all probability) less than two hundred years.

For the benefit of those Masons to whom divergence of ritual is not the less distressing thing, but that it is understandable, it may be said that most authorities agree that it is really not a matter of great moment. All over the world Freemasonry teaches the same truths, offers the same spiritual comfort, creates and continues the same fraternal bond. In “non essentials, variety; in essentials, unity” might have been written of Masonry. It matters little how we wear

the apron in a given degree – so be it that it is worn with honor. The method of giving a sign or a pass matters much less than that what we do is done with understanding.

While Freemasonry continues to observe and revere those few Landmarks which are undisputed everywhere – those which Joseph Fort Newton says are “The Fatherhood of God, the Brotherhood of Man, and the hope of Life Everlasting,” it becomes of less moment that different men, in different times, in different localities, have found more than one way to phrase and to teach the ancient verities of the old, old Craft.

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