

The Gavel Of Authority

Unknown

“The common gavel is an instrument used by operative Masons to break off the corners of rough stones, the better to fit them for the builder’s use; but we as Free and Accepted Masons are taught to use for the more noble and glorious purpose of divesting our hearts and consciences of all the vices and superfluities of life, thereby fitting our minds as living stones for that spiritual building, that House Not Made With Hands, eternal in the Heavens.”

Mackey, distinguished authority, states that the name comes from “Gabel” because the form of the common gavel resembles that of the gable of a house.

But the student will look in the ritual in vain for any allusion to the gavel as an instrument of authority, although in some form it is primarily the badge of power and authority of the Master, and, often in another form and always in a lesser degree, of the Wardens.

In various Jurisdictions throughout the United States the interested visitor will find in use in the East common gavels, stone Mason’s hammers made of both wood and metal, the ordinary mallet gavel of the legislative halls, the auctioneer’s hammer, and a setting maul in all shapes and sizes. All these various implements, in diverse forms and materials, are used as the symbol of the authority of the Master.

Apparently it is not so important that he have a particular symbol; that is, that he carry a “common gavel” or a “setting maul,” but that he have always in open Lodge, in his possession, some instrument with which blows may be struck, as a symbol of his power, his authority, his right to preside and to rule.

Many studious Freemasons contend with some show of reason that inasmuch as the common gavel – the mason’s hammer with one sharp edge - is one of the working tools of a speculative Entered Apprentice while the setting maul is not classified as a working tool, the gavel, and not the maul, is more logically the Master’s symbol of authority. Certainly unless Grand Lodge has ruled otherwise there is no argument to be used against a Master presiding with common gavel, whether real, of metal, or imitation, of rose or other valuable wood.

But those who find their only argument for the use of the common gavel as the symbol of a Master's authority in the undoubted fact that it is one of the striking tools of the stone mason, as well as a working tool of the Speculative Craft, hardly go far enough into antiquity.

As a symbol of authority the hammer is as old as mythology. Thor, the Scandinavian son of Odin and Freya, possessed a miraculous and all-powerful hammer which he threw to do his will. When this was accomplished – usually it was a slaying of enemies or a destruction of something which the God did not like – his accommodating hammer straightway returned to his hands!

Thor, like Jove, also controlled thunderbolts, and from this early myth we associate lightning and thunder with the hammer. We also invert the thought to develop the idea of the authority in a hammer or gavel from its age long association with the power of lightening. The connection is world wide, and by no means confined either to Freemasonry or to Norse mythology. Thor and his hammer are at the bottom of the old “hammer rite of possession.” Thor, God of lightening, by virtue of his control of fire was also the God of the domestic hearth. In ancient days a bride, on taking possession of her new home, received a hammer thrown in her lap as a symbol of possession. When her husband purchased land, he took possession by throwing a hammer over it.

The Indian God Parasu Rama, or Rama of the Battleax, obtained land from the God of the sea by throwing his battleax over the earth, and became possessed of all that it spanned. The South Sea Islanders use a “celt” or hammer, often of huge size, before the chief's dwelling as a symbol of authority. Mrs. H.G.M. Murray Aynsley (English Authority on mythology), says “The Hammer has its uses in Freemasonry as a symbol of authority – the auctioneer, too, used a hammer – here we see possession implied by the falling or throwing down of a hammer.

Thus, when the Master of a lodge first brings down the gavel to convene the Lodge, he by that blow says in effect, “by this act I take possession of this Lodge.”

G.W. Speth, famous writer on Freemasonry, draws attention to the curious articles drawn up by the stone masons of Torgau, in Saxony, in 1462.

And every Mason shall keep his lodge free of all strife; yea, his lodge shall be kept pure as the seat of justice. And no Mason shall bear false witness in his lodge, neither shall he defile it in any manner.

Therefore shall no Mason allow a harlot to enter his lodge, but if any one have ought to commune with her he shall depart from the place of labor so far as one may cast a gavel.

Grand Lodges are sovereign within their Jurisdictions. Whatever their ukase, it immediately becomes right within that Jurisdiction. We find anomalies in American Freemasonry as a result. Thus, most Jurisdictions demand that a Master elect “pass the chairs” or receive the Degree of Past Master in a Chapter of the Royal Arch before he may be installed. But that is not true in all

Jurisdictions. Where it obtains the practice is both right and ancient. Its absence is “right” when Grand Lodge has so ruled.

Since the formation of the Mother Grand Lodge in 1717, Masonic jurists have conceded the right of a Grand Lodge to make Masons “at sight” as inherent; that is the right to convene an occasional or emergent lodge, under dispensation, set it to work and disband it when its work is done. Some American Grand Lodges have ruled to the contrary. It is “right” in those Jurisdictions that a Grand Master cannot make a Mason “at sight.” In forty-three of our forty-nine Grand Jurisdictions, two of the three Great Lights are the Square and Compasses. In the remaining six, Compasses is incorrect, and “compass” is right – aye, with every lexicographer, dictionary, encyclopedia and Masonic authority to the contrary,. “compass” is right in these Jurisdictions.

Under the doctrine that whatever a Grand Lodge declares to be right, whether by actual words or by tacit agreement, is the law and the practice for that particular Jurisdiction, any form of striking instrument which is customary is the correct form in that Jurisdiction. The Grand Jurisdiction which sanctions setting mauls in all three stations, uses the tool which is correct in that Jurisdiction. If the Grand Lodge sets forth that the Master shall use a “common gavel” and the Wardens setting mauls, that practice is there correct. If nothing is said to imply that the Master must use the “common gavel” as a symbol of authority, then the familiar form of mallet or hammer – by far the commonest form of a presiding officer’s instrument – may be considered as correct as any other. We are not very liberal minded in our Masonic symbolism. The Square and the Compasses on our Altars are hardly large or strong enough to play Operative parts in stone cutting and setting. The “working tools” we present to initiates are but miniatures of the real tools they symbolize. The trowel which we tell a candidate is more especially the essential tool of the Master Mason, is usually far too small to spread real cement between real stones. Certainly no gavel of wood, be its form what it may, can “break off the corners of rough stones.” So, while the beauty of the symbolism of the “common gavel” as the presiding officer’s instrument of authority is obvious, usage and custom and expedience in many lodges have metamorphosed it into a little mallet of wood, just as the tiny square upon the Altar is an expedient metamorphosis of the great metal tool of the Operative Mason. Perhaps it is not so important that the wood of the gavel be carved to imitate some particular striking tool of the Operative Masons, as that the brethren understand the power and authority inherent in it.

Whatever form of gavel is used, the Master should always retain possession of the instrument and never have it beyond his reach. He should carry it with him when he moves about the Lodge, whether in process of conferring a degree, or when the Lodge in charge of the Junior Warden at refreshment. This, be it noted, is not only because it is his symbol of authority, but to remind him that, although his position is the highest within the gift of the brethren, he is yet but a brother among brethren. Holding the highest power in the Lodge, he exercises it by virtue of the commonest of the working tools.

All powerful, within certain limits, in the Lodge, the Master has authority to temporarily transfer his power. He may honor a visitor by presenting him with the gavel (and should always remove his hat when the gavel passes). He may place another in the Oriental Chair to confer a degree (in most Jurisdictions) at which time he hands over the gavel of authority. Because he has the right to transfer the authority, he should always be in position to exercise it; another reason for always retaining possession of his gavel!

The authority by which the Master rules is not, of course, the mere physical possession of a piece of wood or iron. The Master may be a physical weakling. Some powerful two hundred-pounder may easily wrest from him the emblem of authority, but such forcible possession would not transfer the authority. The authority to use the gavel comes first from election and installation, the powers of both of which ceremonies rest on the authority of the Grand Lodge. Once installed, a Master cannot be deprived of his gavel of authority except by the Grand Lodge, or the Grand Master “ad interim” (or his deputy acting in his stead). The brethren elect to the East, but cannot “unelect” or take away the power they have once given. The gavel of authority is not transferable save by the will of its lawful possessor, except at the order of the Grand Lodge, or the Grand Master (or his deputy acting for him). In most Jurisdictions such an action by a Grand Master or Deputy, “ad interim” Grand Lodge. is reviewable by the Grand Lodge at its next succeeding regular communication.

The Master enforces the authority of which the gavel is the symbol – first and usually last and all the time – by the good will and the Masonic practices of his brethren. Few Lodges would tolerate disobedience to the gavel by any brother. Occasionally a hot-headed brother has attempted to defy its power. In such cases the Master may ask the offender to leave the room. His failure to respond lays him open to charges of un-Masonic conduct and a Masonic trial. The Master may request the Marshall or Master of ceremonies to remove the offender. Or the Master may – as sometimes has been done – use the gavel to call from labor to refreshment, during which period there will be plenty to admonish the offender of the enormity of his offense against Masonic law. good manners and good taste! The charges given a Mason at the close of all three Degrees are generally held to have the binding force of all other Masonic teachings and obligations. The brother who signs the by-laws as a Master Mason agrees by so doing to abide not only by them but by all the unwritten usages and customs of the Fraternity and all the admonishments of the charges. Those who know their ritual will recall that in the charge of the third degree it is said: “The ancient Landmarks of the Order you are carefully to preserve and never suffer them to be infringed, countenance a departure from the ancient usages and customs of the Fraternity.”

Obedience to the gavel is indeed an “ancient usage and custom” of the Fraternity. Rarely is it defied – never with impunity. But to reach its fullest respect, the gavel must be wisely used.

“It is fine to have a giant’s strength— It is despicable to use it like a giant!”

applies here. The Master “may” do what he will in his Lodge. He may cut off discussion, rap a brother down, cause a brother to leave the room, refuse to put a motion, declare the Lodge at recess, close at his pleasure, control debate, arrange the work, refuse a brother permission to speak – all with the gavel. But the wise Master uses his great power sparingly and never arbitrarily. While the peace and harmony of the Craft are maintained, he need not use it except as the ritual or custom of presiding in the Lodge requires. If he so uses it, it will be respected, its possessor will be venerated, and its transfer to another hand will be considered by the brethren what it actually is, a great and signal honor.

No Master may pay a higher tribute to any brother than to intrust him with the gavel. He offers it to the Grand Master (or his Deputy representing him), because it is the right of those dignitaries to preside in all private Lodges. He offers it to another to preside during the conferring of a degree, or to a distinguished visitor, as a mark of the greatest respect and confidence.

A gavel is not a necessity. A Master and two brethren can open and close a Lodge if they have the Great Lights and a Charter. Lesser Lights, a gavel, Warden’s columns, Aprons, and Altar are not essential. Without the Great Lights and a Charter (or dispensation) a Lodge cannot be opened, though it has every other accessory. The gavel, then, is the symbol of the authority, not the authority itself. Like all great symbols, it takes upon itself in the minds of the brethren something of the quality of the thing symbolized. As we revere the cotton in stripes and stars which became the Flag of our Country; as we revere the paper and ink which became the Great Light in Masonry, so, also, do Freemasons revere the little hammer, mallet, setting maul or common gavel which typifies and symbolizes the height of Masonic power and authority – the majesty of power, the wisdom of Light which rest in and shine forth from the Oriental Chair.

STB – July, 1931